



## Report from Vienna

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To cite this article: Thea Brejzek & Lawrence Wallen (2025) Report from Vienna, Theatre and Performance Design, 11:1-2, 102-106, DOI: [10.1080/23322551.2025.2554012](https://doi.org/10.1080/23322551.2025.2554012)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322551.2025.2554012>



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Published online: 06 Nov 2025.



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## Report from Vienna

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Theatre is the lifeblood of Vienna – the place to see and be seen, a city where every taxi driver knows what is being performed at the Burgtheater that night. Vienna is also a backdrop to the authors' lives; thus, this report from Vienna is as much autobiographical as it is descriptive. Staying in the Seventh District, at the incomparable Hotel Altstadt, all the theatres were within walking distance, and despite the cold, Vienna was as dark, romantic and ornate as ever.

Our report focuses on three significant productions seen over the 2024/25 New Year period. Firstly, a production of Tennessee Williams' *Camino Real* at the Volkstheater, followed by Dead Centre's *Traumdeutung von Sigmund Freud* at the Wiener Akademietheater and Thomas Bernhard's *Holzfällen* at the Burgtheater.

Initiating our sojourn into the theatre world with German theatre and opera director Anna-Sophie Mahler's production of the rarely performed Tennessee Williams 1953 *Camino Real* at the Volkstheater. Here, we were confronted with a disorienting and immersive experience that literally dragged the audience (singing) onto the stage. Featuring the American indie rock band Calexico from Tucson, Arizona, the performance blurred the lines between theatre, concert, and musical. The highly abstracted, physical stage represented the main street of the fictional Southern American or perhaps Mexican town of *Camino Real*, serving as a liminal dreamscape where reality and fiction coexist while reinforcing Tennessee Williams' central literary themes of existential angst and societal critique. The stage, designed by German scenographer Katrin Connan, was a stark, minimalist construction featuring white walls with a raised central rectangular inset in the back wall that was used for either video projection or as a stage within a stage. The space was primarily empty, punctuated by cacti, sand, and the occasional piece of dilapidated furniture. Two blue neon signs indicate the Ritz flophouse on the left: RITZ MEN ONLY, and the upmarket *Siete Mares* on the right, with the plaza in the middle.

The neo-Baroque costumes, designed by Victoria Behr, complemented the white box stage and the stunning videoscapes created by Austrian video artist Max Hammel, coalescing to create an existential terrain that as a physical space mirrors and acts as a central metaphor for the plays' themes of psychological and societal disintegration on the border of oblivion. The relentless and inescapable state of limbo that pervades the performance is reinforced by live and pre-recorded video's ability to layer secondary narratives and reveal psychological states, adding to the character's sense of entrapment in the town,

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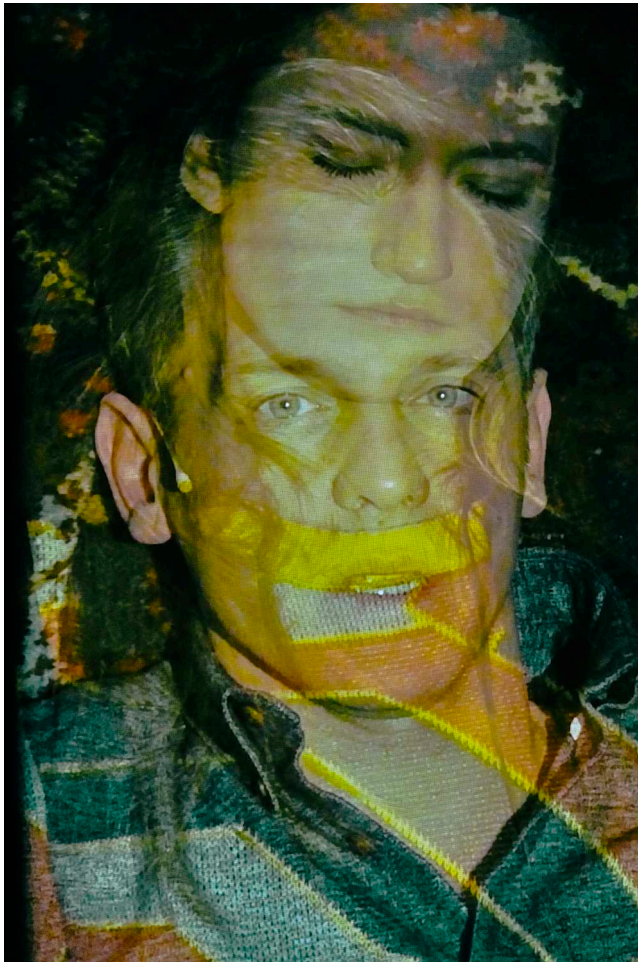
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**Figure 1.** *Camino Real*, Photo: Marcel Urlaub // Volkstheater

where reality disintegrated into a collage of distortion and unreality as the actors work through their external and internal struggles. This layered use of video, a key narrative and visual strategy in the overall staging, created a fractured sense of temporality, never allowing the audience to settle into a single, coherent reality but instead capturing them in a perpetual loop of dislocation and flashbacks, framed by the mournful and melodic live music of Calexico. On leaving the theatre and heading to the theatre bar called *Liebling* [darling], one was struck by the evening's surprising emotional depth. Despite its bleakness, the production's lingering impact was one of exhilaration and delight.

The following evening, we headed out to see a production by *Dead Centre*, the Dublin-based theatre group that we had written about in our upcoming book on virtual models and making worlds; thus, it was with a level of anticipation that we headed off to the *Akademietheater* to watch the 2020 production of *Traumdeutung von Sigmund Freud* [The Interpretation of Dreams by Sigmund Freud], here, given the title, we anticipated great emotional and psychological depth that promised to lead us, according to *Dead Centre's* website, from "Freud's treatment room at Berggasse 19 into our own childhood bedrooms". The theatre has undergone recent renovations and is infamous for its *Ryanair* level of seat comfort and loading procedure. Nevertheless, having found our seats, we settled into what promised to be a truly Viennese evening in contrast to the Mexican borderline experience the night before. Again, pre-recorded and live video from Austrian video artist and stage designer *Sophie Lux* were critical components in the narrative structure, allowing for the dream sequences and inner turmoil to be visualised. Appearing to take a volunteer from the audience to act as Freud's patient and share a personal dream,



**Figure 2.** *Die Traumdeutung von Sigmund Freud*, Photo: Matthias Horn// BURG

which then structured the series of improvisations that followed, Dead Centre directors Ben Kidd and Bush Moukarzel immediately posed the question of the authenticity of the gesture: Is the volunteer an actor, or are they a plant? This ingenious device left us suspended, wondering if we were in the theatre or witnessing real-time psychoanalysis. Continuing to exploit this uncertainty, the performance shifted from a highly realistic rendition of Freud's chambers to a wild, dreamlike sequence, merging greenscreen technologies, live action, and prerecorded imagery, including the memorable scene of Freud's dream of being Hannibal with actors riding cardboard elephants. Nina Wetzel's stage design seamlessly transitioned from the bourgeois comfort of the consulting rooms into a hallucinatory ride, held together by Kevin Gleeson's atmospheric sound design. However, we are still plagued by the question of whether the patient was a volunteer or an actor. Throughout the performance, the volunteer's dreams were analysed both through the dialogue and the visuals, most effectively through the live video of the volunteer and live compositing of the dream sequences. Ultimately, the performance aimed to explore Freud's theories, as outlined in his 1899 book of a similar name, and uses the



**Figure 3.** Holzfällen, Photo: Marcel Urlaub // BURG

volunteer's dream as a central foil to examine aspects of psychoanalysis in a relentless yet entertaining manner. Tumbling into a snow-covered city, we couldn't help but wonder just how much was too much; all concerns were quickly forgotten over a nostalgic, very Viennese dinner at Café Engländer in the Postgasse.

New Year's Eve and a special performance of the 2024 Burgtheater production of *Holzfällen* [Woodcutters], based on Thomas Bernhard's 1984 novel and ascerbic portrayal of Viennese cultural circles, was next. We noted that the theatre's house lights were kept on just a little longer so that the said circles could see and be seen. Again, we were presented with an empty stage, occasionally filled with fleeting projections. The two main elements were a chair in which the writer/narrator sat, played by the formidable and award-winning Burgtheater actor Nicholas Ofczarek, alongside the ten members of the Tyrolian genre-shifting folk ensemble Musicbanda Franui. Bernhard's text *Holzfällen* centred on an artist's dinner, convened in the aftermath of a mutual friend's passing, as the bourgeois guests wait for the arrival of a famous Burgtheater actor. Thus, the Burgtheater itself becomes the stage, and the audience, the target of the novel, serves as its players. In a minimal yet engaging performance, we were immersed in Ofczarek's solo rendition of Bernhard's text interspersed by incursions from Musicbanda Franui. It was the back-and-forth between the spoken word and the music that propelled the performance relentlessly forward, animating Bernhard's sardonic monologue with equal parts of venom, humour, and melancholy. The emptiness of the Burgtheater stage focused our attention on Ofczarek's expressive presence in a way that made this an intensely intimate performance. As we emerged from the imposing neo-Baroque Burgtheater, built by Gottfried Semper and Karl von Hasenauer between 1874 and 1888, into a city

celebrating the New Year, the evening left a lingering and memorable impression, both within and beyond the theatre.

Across the three productions discussed here, the tendency towards empty stages brought to life through pre-recorded and live projection, as we have seen elsewhere in Europe, was evident; the inclusion of live musicians in two of the performances and the critical role they played in the staging and intent of the works was also notable. These strategies brought both new audiences and a dynamic element to the performance, reinforcing what we saw as a tendency against realism in stage design and ushering in a partially immaterial, abstract, and empty space to be filled with remarkable and often surprising effects.

In conclusion, it is perhaps worth mentioning that Viennese audiences are not only stylish but also highly opinionated, and every visit to the theatre is an exceedingly social affair. Just as centuries ago, your fashion sense and your level of appreciation or dismay of the performance will be noticed, noted, and judged.

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