

Newsletter of the Salzburg Festival: Interview

Jossi Wieler on Hugo von Hofmannsthal's *Das Bergwerk zu Falun*



Jossi Wieler directs Hugo von Hofmannsthal's *Das Bergwerk zu Falun*. Photo: Bernd Uhlig

(SF, 5 February 2021) A true rarity by Festival founder Hugo von Hofmannsthal will be performed during the summer of 2021: *Das Bergwerk zu Falun*. It is based on a true story: in 1677 a miner suffered a fatal accident in Falun, Sweden, shortly before his wedding day. 50 years later his corpse, conserved by the mountain, was discovered, undecayed, and was identified by his erstwhile bride. Renowned authors such as E. T. A. Hoffmann, Friedrich Rückert and Johann Peter Hebel had based works on this tale. Hofmannsthal used verse and dramatically realistic and fantastical figures to recount the story. The piece had its posthumous first performance at the Municipal Theatre in Konstanz in 1949, 20 years after the writer's death. Romantic motifs can be found in *Das Bergwerk zu Falun* alongside references to psychoanalysis, a field then developing in Vienna, and Hofmannsthal's critical study of aestheticism and his own existence as an artist.

Jossi Wieler will direct the play at the 2021 Salzburg Festival. The Swiss director has worked repeatedly at the Salzburg Festival since 1998: as a drama director (world premieres by Jelinek, Handke, Zweig) and together with Sergio Morabito as an opera director (*Ariadne auf Naxos*, *Rusalka*). With *Ariadne auf Naxos* – voted Production of the Year in 2001 by the journal *Opernwelt* – Wieler has already directed one work based on a libretto by Hofmannsthal.

Synopsis: Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *Das Bergwerk zu Falun*

After a sea voyage lasting three years, Elis Fröbom returns to his homeland, grabbed by a feeling of profound listlessness. In this state of revulsion towards life, he is visited by a dark stranger. Ancient Torbern allows the young sailor to descend into the realm of the mountain queen – a sumptuous, frozen world which fascinates and terrifies Elis. The ruler over a timeless



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realm which “spurns human concerns,” yet also confronts its visitors with their innermost wishes, the mountain queen offers him to stay with her forever. To do so, he must first live as a miner and prove that he can renounce all human desires in the depth of the mountain. At this command, Elis makes his way to Falun, where he works for the mine owner Dahljöh, living with his daughter Anna and her blind grandmother. When Elis falls in love with the cheerful, high-spirited Anna and she returns his love, a wedding is planned. The mountain queen’s underground realm, however, has lost none of its fascination.

Mr. Wieler, *Das Bergwerk zu Falun* is among Hofmannsthal’s early works and only rarely performed. Why are you staging it now?

Das Bergwerk zu Falun is a drama that asks about the meaning of life in images and motifs all its own. Hofmannsthal takes us into a decayed, moribund world. Elis, this young miner, is searching for his identity, his home and a sense of belonging. Possibly, Hofmannsthal even identified with this figure, who might also be an artist. Moreover, the story is told in metred language – as a verse drama – which is not very familiar to our ear anymore. I think it’s an interesting challenge to make it resound for our own times. In my work, I always seek out the cadence of a work, listening to its score, to bring out what is relevant for us today.

Can you identify with Elis? Or do you feel particularly close to one of the other figures?

When staging a piece, it is always good if you allow all the figures get close to you. In order to tell the figures’ story and enter into their depths, you should love them all. Hofmannsthal, however, drew some of those in this play more richly. And so I can say: yes, Elis feels familiar to me. He is someone who searches for meaning; someone who tries to find his way in this changing world. He is someone who tries to find philosophical answers to the questions of life, the questions of death. Sometimes I see the other figures as extensions or reflections of him. Old Torbern, for example – he is a strange figure – an undead miner who returns to life from a former time and seduces Elis. That is eerie, in a depressive way, but also very vivid.

Does the piece reflect part of our present reality?

Yes, and not only superficially. The piece recounts the flow of time, the decadence of a period. It is about something that has been set in motion and cannot be stopped – a movement in which all the people, not only the main figure Elis, are searching for the meaning of life. There are temptations in this world – for example a mountain queen who tries to lure Elis into her realm. There is an element of demagoguery, of political danger in that – if you choose to interpret it that way. But like all fairy-tales, like all myths, it is not that one-dimensional. There is not only one single answer to the questions asked here.

How do you work with the ensemble?

In this play, one scene follows the other, and some figures never meet at all. However, we will find a framework in which that might be a bit different, in which we can work in a more collective process. Still, of course every figure will be highly visible individually. Such a piece should give the impression of a chamber setting or perhaps a sound improvisation, in which we come together to make Hofmannsthal’s language and the story a sensual experience.



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We have chosen a particularly well-balanced ensemble for this production. Elis will be played by Marcel Kohler, a young protagonist at the Deutsches Theater in Berlin. Anna will be played by Lea Ruckpaul, an ensemble member in Düsseldorf. André Jung will appear, who is very familiar to me as an actor and a good friend. He has performed in Salzburg several times and is the winner of the Nestroy Award as well. And the great Hildegard Schmahl will join the cast, alongside other special artists.

Could you tell us more about the approach you are taking for your production?

The worlds which Hofmannsthal describes are highly illusionist, almost film-like in character. To illustrate them on stage would be rather boring. We will find other ways to bring them to life. I would like to find a framework in order to give the story, this search for identity which is inscribed in the work, its relevance. Hofmannsthal began writing the work in 1899 and only finished it in 1911. It was never performed during his lifetime and only given its first performance posthumously, after World War II. Oddly enough, the work had a similar fate as the corpse of the miner: only after decades was it restored to the light of the stage.

I think that the way the figures deal with one another and the cadence of their language also resulted from a feeling that theirs were not secure times. World War I was looming. You can find this unease reflected in the work. On the other hand, it does delve deeply into its figures' psyche. It is not a coincidence that Sigmund Freud was working in Vienna while Hofmannsthal wrote this play – an influence which is palpable in the piece.

How would you describe your connection with the author Hugo von Hofmannsthal?

It is my first time directing a play by Hofmannsthal. But I have studied Hofmannsthal quite a lot. He is a great writer, an exceptionally gifted artist. The fact that he founded the Festival with Richard Strauss and Max Reinhardt – that initiated something which, as we know, has survived wonderfully to this day. Salzburg has a unique atmosphere; there is not just *one* local genius, not just Mozart, but many artists who lived, wrote, composed and performed here. This is something I find inspiring every time I am here – and it is no coincidence that so many artists keep returning here. I am always happy to work in Salzburg.

Is the Salzburg Festival's audience special?

In Salzburg, artists are able to work in full concentration and freedom. These are special artistic conditions. You have the feeling that the audience attending the Festival is also open to its idea, and to the precious jewels being invented there. I did a world premiere by Elfriede Jelinek (*Er nicht als er*) in Salzburg in 1998, and it was a unique experience to witness the great interest in the audience. Or take our *Ariadne auf Naxos*: the open-mindedness with which the audience reacted to it, perhaps for the very reason that our reading of the work was a new one. I have the feeling that the Salzburg audience likes to be seduced – into worlds that only the theatre can invent.



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How did you experience the coronavirus crisis? Do current developments influence your artistic work?

Das Bergwerk zu Falun reads differently before the backdrop of the coronavirus crisis than it did a year ago. This dark fairy-tale subject has gained another layer of association, perhaps a more relevant one, and this will undoubtedly inform our work. Of course we all hope that it will be possible to work as freely in the theatre as we did before the coronavirus – with the freedom of mind and body which the arts need to survive. And which we need all the more!

Hugo von Hofmannsthal (1874 - 1929)

DAS BERGWERK ZU FALUN

Drama

New production

Premiere: 7 August 2021

6 further performances

Landestheater

Jossi Wieler Director

Muriel Gerstner Sets

Anja Rabes Costumes

Lars Wittershagen Music

Annette ter Meulen Lighting

Marion Tiedtke Dramaturgy

With

André Jung

Marcel Kohler

Lea Ruckpaul

Hildegard Schmahl

Edmund Telgenkämper

Sylvana Krappatsch

For further information: <https://www.salzburgerfestspiele.at/en/p/the-falun-mine>