

by *Alexandra Roth* and *Anna Claessen*

It's hot, loud, a Turkish wedding and a work of theatre. It's socio-experimental theatre.

Standing in front of the entrance door, we again checked the address, Ragnathof, Grundsteingasse 12. "Situated in the 16th District, near Thaliatraste," the invitation said.

We followed the crowd, taking the narrow flight of stairs up to the second floor where rows of chairs were set up, men to the left, women to the right.

To the side, young men and women lined the room, festively dressed, loudly welcoming the visitors pouring into the room, throwing rice and rose petals into the air to the beats of drum music. The signs of a traditional Turkish wedding were all there but "it's theatre, theatre combined with rituals," Eve Brenner explained. Brenner is the creative energy behind the experimental theatre space, Fleischerei, and producer of what she calls "wedding theatres."

It's also political action. Heinrich and Asil Kislal from the experimental theatre company "Das Kunst" have used the project as a way to address the issue of forced marriage and its precarious consequences on the lives of young Turkish women of the second and third generation. The theatrical framework was meant to provide the young Austrian-Turkish women most affected a chance to give voice to their resistance.

"Rituals like weddings are tightly rooted in a migration culture," Brenner said, "and migration and immigration are the hot topics of our time." After the staging of an African and a Chinese wedding ritual, the Turkish wedding was the third socio-experimental theatre ritual staged in what may become a procession of weddings to come.

Despite the approximately 100 people, a number barely imaginable

A Turkish Wedding as a Work of Theater:
Staging the Hot Topics of our Time

At the Fleischerei Integration As Performance Art

for a space of that size, we managed to get to two seats on the side, breaking out of the stream of people, right before the ritual (or was it a play?) was about to start.

While the last arrivals were still looking for a place, the young actors began a joyful dance around the young groom's chair, placed in the middle, announcing the bride's arrival. Persian carpets, candles, dimmed light and a group of three musicians producing oriental sounds contributed to the festival atmosphere. Two beamers projected the scene as caught by a cameraman onto white walls to the right and left, enlarging the scene, where subtitles translated the Turkish passages.

On stage, the wedding guests were performing in German, telling a personal story, often dilemma, while the bride and groom spoke and sang in Turkish.

Within the ritual, the stories of five wedding members unfolded. There was the first bridesmaid, an Austrian girl, desperately in love with a Turkish boy whose parents would not accept her. There was her best friend, a

young Turkish woman, grown up in Vienna as the daughter of an immigrant family. Her parents were overly strict and protective parents and kept her on a short leash while her brothers were allowed to roam the city as they liked.

The theme of oppression and urge for equality was picked up by one of the older Turkish women among the guests.

"Wie ich es doch hasse ein Mädchen zu sein," how much I hated to be a girl, she started her passionate monologue, telling us how she was forced at 16 to marry a fifty-year-old husband, how she was constantly oppressed and how finally at the age of 30, she managed to be free by divorcing him. All she fights for now is that her daughter will love to be a girl.

From her memory, we were abruptly drawn back to the 'reality' of the stage and everyday life, as the bride's father tries to make the divorced woman leave the wedding because of her condemnable display of independence.

"Now that I am free, you don't accept me anymore," she screamed in frustration as the music set in again and the wedding guests in the background broke into another joyful dance around the bride and the groom.

There was a strange and palpable contradiction between the vivid, happy and energetic dancing and singing, and the dilemmas of the bride and groom – an ironic and conscious choice of the producer and director.

One of the bridesmaids summed it up forcefully, "What kind of culture is that? – Happiness, energy and love for life on the one side and on the other side, lies and oppression, stupid obligations, and dusty talk about family honor. When not everybody can say everything out loud, when a wife can not say what she wants, when a bride can not say whom she wants to have standing by her side, then it's all a lie – it's a lie, don't you think?"

Chair legs scraped on the floor as people shifted in their seats, uncomfortable coughing, nervous laughter circled among the young people. The audience could feel the strong emotions. It was true theater. It had struck a chord.

"Such moments are priceless," Brenner explained, "for theater has to gain a deeper sense again, other than just being mere entertainment for the upper class. In her projects, her aim is to uncover topics that touch our time and then take them further by applying new ways of expression, new forms of theater."

The socio-theatrical format combines professionals and amateurs. Among that night's wedding guests were three actors who, together with a professional director and choreographer, have been working with the young people of the Youth Center VZA and Ragnathof, where the production was shown.

Brenner pointed out that this combination is a necessary and an important element in the project. "Working with amateurs requires a great director and choreographer because amateur theater is always in danger of drifting into clichés," she warned. "It takes a lot of effort to bring out more in each person than just the superficial mask."

Looking around the crowded space, one could feel the interest with which the Turkish and German audience in their seats or standing on the sides followed the play with craning necks – an interest and involvement hard to imagine in the balconies of Vienna's more traditional theater spaces.

"We need to bring the people from the *Burgtheater* to the other, smaller theaters that bring variety," Brenner said.

The quasi wedding had no finale because the bride disappeared, fled her wedding to escape a forced marriage. A chaos broke out among the guests, however, the bride appeared again, standing in the middle of the audience, explaining herself and her feelings. Her passionate plea in Turkish appeared simultaneously in German, projected on the walls.

"We have to ask ourselves, whom we are playing for. For whom and why are we expressing ourselves?" Brenner explained her passion for the new format. "Here, we make rituals the subject of our performance and at the same time involve the audience, trying to integrate them into the experience."

As abruptly as it started, the staged wedding ended. A round of applause, people moving around, embracing the young actors.

But who were actually the actors, and who not? Never mind: boundaries are what they are trying to get away from.

Further information for performances and events such as *Integration Mondays - Kitchen stories* www.experimentalthheater.at