

Imagining a World Ruled by Women

By A.J. Goldmann

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BERLIN — Nuclear brinkmanship, unending war, impending environmental catastrophe. Our world is an absolute mess. Would things look different if women were in charge? That’s the starting point for Yael Bartana’s aptly titled “What If Women Ruled the World?” at the Berlin Volksbühne, a conceptually and visually striking production that feels urgent, if not entirely persuasive.

Actors and a rotating cast of invited experts sit around a large circular desk reminiscent of the iconic War Room table in Stanley Kubrick’s 1964 satire, “Dr. Strangelove.” But this is a Peace Room, where these real-life experts address a fictional all-female government with proposals on how to avert an impending nuclear catastrophe, alongside reflections about empowering women and whether a matriarchy would produce a more harmonious society.

Ms. Bartana is an Israeli multimedia artist and no stranger to speculative projects. In the past, she has imagined a mass Jewish return to Poland and a rebuilding of the Temple of Solomon.

At the performance I attended, the guests included a human rights lawyer, a defense and security expert, a political scientist and a former Austrian politician who is a nuclear nonproliferation activist. Over the course of the intermission-less performance, their testimony was drawn out (and occasionally shut down) by the actors seated among them. The most bellicose participant is the Army Chief of

Staff, played by Alix Wilton Regan doing her best impersonation of the hawkish, gum-chewing general in Kubrick's film, whose scuffle with the Russian ambassador provokes the immortal line, "Gentlemen, you can't fight in here. This is the War Room."

Anne Tismer's neurotic State Secretary is the closest thing the show has to a Dr. Strangelove of its own. Instead of fantasizing about sexual utopias in nuclear bunkers, though, she keeps interrupting (amusingly at first, and then tiresomely) with lengthy monologues about matriarchal orders in the animal kingdom, specifically among the bonobos.

The French playwright Jean Genet envisioned an entirely different kind of matriarchy in his nightmarish 1956 work, "The Balcony," which has been given a furious and intimate production by the Croatian director Ivica Buljan on the smallest of the Residenztheater Munich's three stages.

The drama unfolds in a brothel in an unnamed city while a bloody revolution rages outside. This "house of illusions," as Genet referred to it, is the dominion of Madame Irma, who caters to the whims of the Judge, the Bishop, the General and the Chief of Police, pillars of society who frequent her rooms to get their kicks. (It is strongly suggested that Irma's clientele are ordinary working men living out role-playing fantasies, but, like so much else in this complex play, that's open to interpretation.)

The convulsions of the city under siege are never far from the lurid goings-on in the world of the bordello, where Irma wields absolute power, acting as a sort of stage manager of the male desires she caters to. In the play's second half, Irma is propped up as a queen by the revolutionary government, and her lecherous clients are propelled into actual positions of power.

Genet was famously dissatisfied with virtually every performance he saw of “The Balcony.” I would like to think that he would have approved of Mr. Buljan’s uncompromising staging, even if Aleksander Denic’s set, made of refrigerators and freezers (whose arrangement, unsubtly, resembles a swastika), is a far cry from the chandelier-filled sumptuousness that Genet envisioned.

Power and sexual politics lie at the heart of the play, yet Mr. Buljan resists sexualizing the women who inhabit the brothel. There is a significant amount of nudity, but it is all male. Early in the evening, an old man hobbles onstage and frantically masturbates in a freezer. Right before intermission, Roger the revolutionary (Marko Mandic) invades the audience and strips completely before driving us outside to gather around a burning oil barrel and sing “The Internationale.”

Another memorable scene recreates the pivotal moment in Ruben Östlund’s film “The Square,” winner of the Palme d’Or at the Cannes Film Festival last year, in which a performance artist in character as a primate terrorizes the well-heeled guests at a gala dinner. In this production, Tim Werths climbs around among the audience, howling and beating his chest in a convincing performance that has just the right amount of menace.

Mr. Buljan further engages us with original songs by the composer Mitja Vrhovnik-Smrekar, crooned by Cynthia Micas accompanied by her fellow actors on various instruments. Such liberties are common on German stages but seem especially suitable here, since Genet himself gave the play a meta-theatrical note. After three-and-a-half hallucinatory hours, Irma wryly addresses the audience that has witnessed this succession of unsettling, feverish scenes: “You must now go home, where everything — you can be quite sure — will be more false than here.”

A fear of female agency runs through the plays of August Strindberg. The Swedish playwright considered the struggle for women's rights a dangerous revolution that threatened to upend society. His 1887 play, "The Father," written as a response to Ibsen's feminist "A Doll's House," is a rancor-filled lament for the loss of male authority. A captain and his wife spar bitterly over the education of their daughter, Bertha. And while the captain rails against how all the old certainties are eroding, his wife conspires to drive him mad and lock him up.



August Strindberg's "The Father" at the Münchner Kammerspiele. Thomas Aurin

Nicholas Stemann's production for the Münchner Kammerspiele manages to confront Strindberg's chauvinistic fear and misogynist message without belittling or making fun of them. The striking set is bathed in neon green, and the small cast often sports sexless white costumes. Amid this disorienting milieu, the actors play out Strindberg's scenes, often repeating them while swapping roles. A group of

burly lumberjacks (members of the local Camerata Vocale München) periodically invade, singing about the “strategic displacement of the binary relationship” and other nuggets of gender theory that the captain’s children (this production invents a brother — or possibly a male double — for Bertha) like to sound off about.

Mr. Stemann, a German director best known for his collaborations with the Nobel Prize winner Elfriede Jelinek, understands this play as a manifesto of the “angry white male” before that idea’s time. Among the accomplished cast, the young actress Julia Riedler is particularly captivating as the captain’s wife, while Wiebke Puls, one of the Kammerspiele’s best ensemble members, makes a surprising late evening appearance. She turns the bitter final scene, with the captain’s impassioned defense of his diminishing authority, into a shattering one-woman show that lets us hear Strindberg’s words in a less shrill and reactionary register.

Despite the rights victories that women have achieved over the last 130 years, Strindberg’s fearful predictions of unbridled female dominance have not come to pass. For better or worse (and probably worse), we are still a long way from a world where women set the rules.

What If Women Ruled the World? Directed by Yael Bartana. Berlin Volksbühne, through June 7.

The Father. Directed by Nicholas Stemann. Münchner Kammerspiele, through June 29.

The Balcony. Directed by Ivica Buljan. Residenztheater Munich (Marstall), through June 28.