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World of Wonder, a Mirror to Ourselves

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Great family theatre does not ask adults to become less discerning or children to become more grown-up. Instead, it creates a shared imaginative space in which different generations can discover different meanings. With Gullivers Reisen, Nils Strunk and Lukas Schrenk embrace precisely this ambition, transforming Jonathan Swift's extraordinary novel into a musical adventure.

This theatrical exuberance opens the door to questions about power, belonging and the precarious business of being human. Their approach recognises something essential about Swift: fantasy and satire are not competing impulses, but natural companions. Gulliver's encounters with miniature courtiers, giants, airborne intellectuals and eloquent horses make the familiar suddenly strange. Rather than restricting the adaptation to the better-known adventures in Lilliput and the land of the giants, the directors also explore Laputa and the Houyhnhnms. This broader itinerary gives the production an intellectual horizon beyond the pleasures of a conventional adventure story.

At its centre stands Gunther Eckes's Gulliver, a traveller whose openness makes him an effective guide through these unstable worlds. Published accounts describe a charismatic, physically comic protagonist, repeatedly astonished by circumstances that overturn his assumptions. There is a productive vulnerability in this conception: Gulliver is neither an invincible hero nor an authoritative interpreter. He must continually learn how to look, how to listen and how little his previous experience guarantees.

Maximilian Lindner's stage design gives these reversals a persuasive theatrical vocabulary. An imposing ship anchors the adventure in the romance of departure, while changes of scale emerge through objects, spatial relationships and the performers' coordinated play. A matchbox becomes an instrument of altered perspective. Crucially, these transformations do not depend on video: their appeal lies in the encounter between material craftsmanship and the spectator's imagination. The stage makes no secret of being a stage, and that openness becomes its magic.

The visual world gains further richness from Anne Buffetrille and Lara Regula's costumes, Roman Sobotka's lighting and Alexander Nefzger's sound design. Shadow theatre and horse masks extend the production's expressive range, while Laputa's interplay of light and darkness introduces a more unsettling atmosphere. Such variety is not merely ornamental. Each new environment requires a different way of seeing, reminding us that perspective is both the subject of Gulliver's journey and the foundation of

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theatrical illusion.

Music supplies another essential dimension. Strunk's score, with lyrics by Schrenk, moves through a vocabulary encompassing pop, rap and musical-theatre gestures. A six-piece live band brings together acoustic instruments, voices and electronics, allowing the adventure to acquire something of a concert's immediacy. The generous musical framework favours accessibility over austerity: Swift's imaginative universe becomes a place audiences can enter through rhythm and melody as well as language.

The ensemble contributes the human texture that spectacle alone cannot provide. Lola Klamroth's Glumdalclitch offers tenderness within a narrative repeatedly preoccupied with dominance and vulnerability. Stefko Hanushevsky combines comic performance with trumpet playing, while Martin Schwab's older Gulliver interrupts the storytelling through a knowingly theatrical framing device. Markus Meyer's elegant horse belongs to another register again, bringing poise to a world in which humanity's presumed superiority becomes increasingly questionable.

There is, admittedly, a tension between the production's expansive generosity and its dramatic economy. At two hours and forty-five minutes, including an interval, this is a substantial expedition. Its musical abundance can soften the severity associated with Swift's satire; published responses differ over whether that accessibility enriches the encounter or blunts its edge. Yet the ambition to welcome younger spectators without excluding darker implications remains an artistically worthwhile undertaking.

Ultimately, the production's most attractive proposition is that wonder need not be the enemy of thought. Its ships, shadows, songs and transformations invite delight, but its changing proportions carry a persistent challenge: who appears powerful, civilised or reasonable depends upon where one stands. In celebrating theatre's capacity to remake the world before our eyes, Gullivers Reisen also encourages us to reconsider our place within it. That combination of imaginative hospitality and philosophical curiosity gives this Burgtheater adventure its generous heart.

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