

## Ayad Akhtar Gets a European Welcome, With Conditions



From left, Peter Simonischek, Irina Sulaver, Aenne Schwarz and Philipp Hauss in Ayad Akhtar's "The Who & the What" in Vienna. Credit: Reinhard Werner

By A. J. Goldman

- VIENNA — A decade ago, when Ayad Akhtar was teaching acting classes here, he would often pass the [Burgtheater](#), the monumental building on the Ringstrasse that houses one of the largest and most influential theaters in the world.

“I was a much younger man and used to think, ‘My God, if I could ever have a play there someday!’ It seemed the most far-fetched thing you could ever imagine,” Mr. Akhtar, 47, recently recalled.

In the intervening years, he has become [one of America's foremost playwrights](#), winning the 2013 Pulitzer Prize for drama for “[Disgraced](#)” and seeing his work — which digs deeply, often discomfitingly so, into the Muslim-American experience — produced at theaters around the country.

Along with his success at home, Mr. Akhtar has forged particularly close ties to the German-speaking world, where his works are extremely popular, especially for a writer who is both American and living.

A 2016 production of “Disgraced” marked Mr. Akhtar’s Burgtheater debut and won him a top theatrical honor here. And late last month Mr. Akhtar was back at the Burg for the local premiere of

his 2014 drama [“The Who & the What,”](#) about the patriarch of a Pakistani-American family and his freethinking and outspoken daughter.

Karin Bergmann, the director of the theater, said she had programmed it because “it’s not only an American play — it’s about modern people with archaic problems.”

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Klaus Missbach, the production’s dramaturge, added: “You will see that even though it takes place in Atlanta, it is going to appeal to people here in Vienna.”



Ayad Akhtar, center left, meeting well-wishers after a performance of “The Who & the What” at the Akademietheater, the second stage of the Burgtheater in Vienna. Credit Akos Stiller for The New York Times

They were speaking at a reception after Felix Prader’s stripped-down production at the Akademietheater, the Burg’s second, smaller stage, where remaining performances are sold out. Along with the playwright and the actors, they were crammed into the theater’s small canteen, shouting their congratulations and conversations in an atmosphere thick with cigarette smoke and fragrant Austrian white wine.

The biggest difference between this staging and an American production was that the family onstage was played by an all-white cast, with Peter Simonischek, the imposing 71-year-old actor best known for the hit film “Toni Erdmann,” as the father, Afzal. (Austria’s actors, like its population, are overwhelmingly white and Christian.)

“He was captivating and lovable and infuriating — in some ways, he was the most infuriating Afzal I’ve seen,” Mr. Akhtar said afterward. “He did not shy away from anything that the audience might not like about him.”

Mr. Akhtar said he is curious to see how Austrian audiences square their affection for Mr. Simonischek with the role — “praying in Arabic and talking about Allah and loving his performance.”

Not too long ago, this sort of casting would have given the playwright pause. He had qualms last year when he found out — shortly before curtain — that the 2017 Hamburg premiere of the same

work had also been cast entirely with white actors, although Germany has a larger and more diverse population than Austria.

“Then I saw the play and it was staggeringly beautiful,” he recalled, sipping black tea at Nil, an Egyptian cafe in this city’s trendy seventh district, soon after the opening. “I saw a German audience see their families in this Pakistani family. And then I saw that play get started to be produced around Germany.”

Subsequent runs have cast Muslim and Middle Eastern actors, as in the current production at Berlin’s Vaganten Bühne. “So, oddly, a premiere production cast with white actors created more opportunities in the long run for actors of my ethnicity,” Mr. Akhtar explained, “which is one of the goals I’ve had with writing plays like that.”

Even beyond issues of ethnicity, American playwrights working in Europe have to acclimate themselves to the visions of directors, who often adjust plays’ settings and sometime even alter the texts.

For “The Who & the What” in Hamburg, the director Karin Beier cut an entire scene and added a monologue written by Jacques Derrida. “In a sense, she didn’t do my play,” Mr. Akhtar said. “But it was beautiful and, in my opinion, just as good as what I had written.”

An earlier production of “Disgraced,” directed by Martin Kusej, was presented in Turin, Italy, and in Munich. Mr. Kusej, soon to be the artistic director of the Burg, and currently at Munich’s Residenz Theater, set the play entirely on a square of carved coal.



Martin Kusej directed a deconstructed version of Mr. Akhtar’s Pulitzer-winning play, “Disgraced.”CreditAndrea Macchia

“Martin deconstructed the play and I was humbled and encouraged at moments to see that my text could withstand the stress test. But not in every moment,” Mr. Akhtar admitted with a laugh, adding that he does not disapprove of such disruptions.

“I do believe that directors tend to understand their audiences better than I can,” he added. “So I don’t want to impose how a play should be done. And I have been surprised so many times by the innovations that the directors here in Europe bring.”

In addition to the Burgtheater premiere, the playwright is here to teach an acting class. Above and beyond these commitments, he just seems glad to be back in this culture-rich city.

“It’s a theater artist’s paradise in a way, because there’s such a deep psychological and sociological support for the theater, *in addition* to a deep state and financial structure,” he said. “It’s amazing the way culture is just a part of life here.”

That his plays have found an engaged audience here isn’t something he takes for granted.

“It’s still surprising for me,” Mr. Akhtar admitted. “There certainly *is* an expectation or desire that people here are going to learn something about America, because they don’t understand it: How could we go from Obama to Trump? How can we be so strong and so thoughtless? Those are contradictions that people have a hard time understanding.”

His latest work, “Junk,” which was nominated for a 2018 Tony Award for best play, and explores the impact of Wall Street chicanery in the 1980s, has already been presented in Hamburg and Munich.

And of course the religious and cultural conflicts at the heart of much of his work are amply echoed in European nations, particularly Germany, which has seen its national identity evolve as the country has absorbed immigrants and refugees, some from Muslim countries.

“What is this process of immigration and multiculturalism, which, for this culture is just an idea, but for us in America is a reality?” he said. “How is that going to play out?”

**Correction:** June 16, 2018

An earlier version of this article misstated the given name of a theater director. She is Karin Beier, not Katrin Beier.

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