

MEASURE FOR MEASURE by William Shakespeare c.1604

Shakespeare set *Measure for Measure* in Vienna, and for my performance I have chosen to bring the time period forward by 300 years to Vienna of the mid 1900s. I considered that many of the social, cultural and political issues prevalent then would be an effective foil to communicate Shakespeare's themes, and it is also a point in history that is more accessible to us and is associated with a sense of collective anxiety and impending crisis.

VIENNA 1910

Vienna in the mid 1900's was vibrant and energetic and Europe's most ethnically, linguistically and culturally diverse city. Its people were a mix of a centuries old aristocracy, wealthy industrialists, the bourgeoisie, a Jewish elite, newly arrived immigrants from the Austro-Hungarian empire and the poor living in slums, all with their own set of unwritten social and moral codes. Art, music, writing and intellectual thought flourished, exploring a new way of thinking, living and communicating. The body was investigated through medical advancements and the mind through psychoanalysis. Opera, theatre and spectacle were loved, and private patronage of the arts flourished particularly by the Jewish bourgeoisie.

But it was also a place of increasing tension and anxiety: issues of nationalism were putting a strain on the Empire; the establishment and bourgeoisie felt their traditional and secure way of life was being threatened by the rise of Modernism and the increasingly progressive attitudes of the intellectuals and those they perceived as subversives; and the rise of tabloid journalism brought scandal into the public eye.

There was an undercurrent of tension, with nationalism challenging the Empire; the rise of anti-Semitism, the emergence of Modernism, and the progressive lifestyles of the artistic and intellectual communities threatening the traditional and secure life of the establishment and the bourgeoisie, and the rise of tabloid journalism bringing scandal into the public eye.

Coffee houses were of central importance to Viennese life; a meeting place where artistic and literary communities mixed with politicians and bureaucrats resulting in a cross-fertilization of ideas and sharing of news. They were a space where restrictive social codes could be relaxed and where people could be on display or secluded.

THEMES

The themes of the play that resonated with me were the fear of infectious disease and death; the fear of public disorder by authority and a distrust of "subversives" on the margins of society; surveillance and control of information; and state intervention into a citizen's private life, seeking to control through laws and the encouragement of socially acceptable behaviour.

I felt these issues were very relevant to our current situation; our fear of sickness and economic and social collapse; increasingly authoritarian political regimes; and the hypocrisy and corruption of those in positions of power. I envisioned these themes feeding into the collective anxieties of an audience as they watched the play.

Although the play ends with a series of marriages, a common finale for Shakespeare's comedies, in the case of *Measure for Measure* the happy ending is subverted, as marriage appears as a means of

punishment and social control, removing autonomy and free will from the characters. They have been released from prison or their sentences in return for exchanging marriage vows but express no joy at this. Characters who had previously been living as they chose, on the margins of society, are brought back under the control of the state through the institution of marriage.

PERFORMANCE

The performance will have the aesthetic of an energetic cabaret, with an atmosphere that is gritty, irreverent, bawdy, edgy, sexy, ironic and cynical, with the complicity and interaction between the audience and actors typical of original Shakespearean productions, and the mutual acknowledgement that we are in the present day watching a play and are never completely transported to an alternate reality. The distinctive artistic and design movements of Vienna in the mid 1900s will enhance the cabaret aesthetic, and effectively communicate my characters positions of vibrancy, liberty and provocation on the one hand, and severity and restraint on the other.

SET

This atmosphere will be enhanced by its setting in a Spiegeltent, which will both echo the original Shakespearean performances at the Globe Theatre which were “in the round” and serve to represent a typical Viennese Coffee house with its ornate wood paneling, partitioned booths around the walls and tables and chairs in the centre. The original script will be adhered to, with song and dance pieces.