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Der Vetter aus Dingsda

MUNICH

Staatstheater am Gärtnerplatz

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COMPOSER EDUARD KÜNNEKE was already quite well known when his operetta *Der Vetter aus Dingsda* (The Cousin from Whatchemacallit) had its premiere, in 1921 at Berlin's Theater am Nollendorfplatz, but chose to expand his musical vocabulary by incorporating many of the era's popular dances into his score. This was not to be a typical work in three-quarter-time: Because the score included tango, Boston waltz and foxtrot, among other dance tunes, *Der Vetter aus Dingsda* was a reflection of the time of its composition. The plot, despite its typical happy-ending love story, also reflected changing attitudes in post-World War I Europe, where money was in short supply and where the younger generation, feeling betrayed by its war-hungry parents, began to question the morals and strictures of the older generation. With one super number following the next, *Der Vetter aus Dingsda* was a hit from its first run and has remained a staple in the German language repertoire, with the exception of the WW II years, when the Nazis banned it because of its "western" music. (Unfortunately, Künneke joined the Nazi party and changed his compositional form during the Third Reich to suit the wishes of those in control.)

On December 17, the Staatstheater am Gärtnerplatz replaced Karl Absenger's classically delightful production from 1992 with a new version by young stage director Lukas Wachernig (seen in livestream). Wachernig, finding a parallel to another rebellious generation, updated his interpretation to the 1960s. Designer Dagmar Morell gave us mini-skirts for the two leading women, hippy costumes for the men and exaggerated obesity for the avaricious aunt and uncle. The sets of Karl Fehringer and Judith Leykauf were purposely in exaggerated bad taste. The best number in the work, the Batavia Foxtrot ensemble, saw the cast in a drugged stupor. This all might have read well as a concept but most of these modernizations quite simply detracted from the impact of the work rather than adding to it. Adam Cooper, one of the best choreographers of this era, was given the unenviable task of fitting a square peg into a round hole—changing standard dance steps set to music composed specifically for those steps, to a rock-and-roll-age production. What emerged was the uncomfortable replacement of sure-fire dancing with unconvincing hip-swaying and body twisting.

Conductor Andreas Kowalewitz was charged with reducing the orchestral size due to Corona restrictions. As the original score was for salon orchestra, this expertly done reduction was in tune with Künneke's wishes. Kowalewitz took some rather hasty tempos, at times leaving his singers gasping for breath, but his interpretation brought the score very much to life.

German tenor Maximilian Mayer, cast in the all-important and large role of the First Stranger, achieved perfection in every aspect of the role. He sang with ease: top notes flowed, and phrases cascaded meltingly, one after the other. His voice sounded beautiful in every register, his diction was exemplary and he acted with conviction and great charm. Soprano Judith Spiesser, better known as an accomplished opera singer of roles such as Lucia, Gilda and Queen of the Night, still lacks that indefinable "it" that one needs as an operetta diva. Although she sang satisfactorily, singing is not enough in this difficult genre. At times bland, she needs to grow into a role as vital as Julia de Weert.

Julia Sturzlbaum, who has much experience in musicals, was vivaciously lively as Julia's friend Hannchen. As the caricatured fat, overfed uncle and aunt, Erwin Windegger and Dagmar Hellberg pulled off their assignments with aplomb. Embarrassingly costumed Daniel Gutmann sang splendidly as Julia's nervous, introverted, inappropriate suitor Egon von Wildenhagen, Stefan Bischoff, costumed somewhere between Elvis and Jerry Lee Lewis, made the most of his deus-ex-machina role of the Second Stranger, Peter Neustifter and Holger Ohlmann rounded out the cast in the roles of Karl and Hans, two servants. —*Jeffrey A. Leipic*