

**FREIE
REPUBLIK
WIENER
FEST
WOCHEN**

6 - 8 June
Volkstheater



Kurdwin Ayub

WEISSE WITWE

It is a daring reinterpretation of the popular story of Sheherazade from the *Arabian Nights* into an erotic adventure we can empathize with. In 2666, Queen Aliah is the ruler of the Muslim state of Europe, satisfying her desires with a brand-new white man every night. She kills every one of them the morning after – simply because they are getting on her nerves. Terrified men are hiding from the queen's knights throughout Europe. One day, however, an old white man volunteers to spend a night with the queen. Just like Sheherazade did once upon a time, he recounts a long story: the story of the white widow. Following the international success of her latest film *Moon* with Florentina Holzinger in the lead, Viennese film director Kurdwin Ayub (born in 1990 in Iraq) delivers her first work for theatre, telling the story of a woman who stops at nothing for her passion with grim humour, featuring rapper addeN and Georg Friedrich in the lead roles and a spectacular set by Nina von Mechow.

- 🗣 German
- CC English subtitles
- 🕒 1 hr. 45 mins.
- ♿ barrier-free access

**MY DEAR SISTER, IF YOU ARE
NOT ASLEEP, I ENTREAT YOU,
AS IT WILL SOON BE LIGHT,
TO RELATE TO ME ONE OF
THOSE AGREEABLE TALES
YOU KNOW. IT WILL, ALAS, BE
THE LAST TIME I SHALL
RECEIVE THAT PLEASURE.**

– *The Arabian Nights* (trans. Edward Forster)

Text, Direction Kurdwin Ayub **With** addeN, Samirah Breuer, Inga Busch, Benny Claessens, Georg Friedrich, Zarah Kofler **motion*s Tanz- und Bewegungsstudio (Dance choir)** Felipe Barrera, Luisa Bocksnick, Luna Caric, Fares Ghamrawy, Matti Goltz, Jonas Hoffmann, Levin Kaufmann, Kilian Löderbusch, Rocio Parraga, Aminata Reuss, Lena Strützke, Christoph Viol **Stage, Costume design** Nina von Mechow **Choreography** Camilla Schielin **Light design** Denise Potratz **Dramaturgy** Leonie Hahn, Anna Heesen **Translation** Corinna Dümmler **Surtitles** Agnieszka Friez

Production Volksbühne am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz (Berlin)

executed by the team of the Vienna Festival (Wiener Festwochen) | Free Republic of Vienna

World premiere February 2025, Volksbühne am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz (Berlin)

DO IT ANYWAY

INTERVIEW WITH KURDWIN AYUB

You became publicly known as a film director.

How did you come to direct for theatre now?

I have no idea. I don't normally watch plays and I find the artificial language in theatre very strange. Plus, I have noticed theatre people are much better read (i.e., much cleverer) than film people. So I have no idea why René Pollesch and Anna Hessen wanted me at the time. I had once made a musicvideo for a play at Volksbühne and my film *Sun* was featured at Berlinale at the time, so that's how they discovered me and wanted to give me a grand stage and first I just thought: LOL, seriously? And yes, then I thought: Why not?

You are assailed by the right and the left of the political spectrum for your work. Do you like to provoke?

YES! ... Well, wait a moment... I am doing research for my next film about war crimes at the moment and I keep noticing how much we are living in a parallel world. There is a world out there where people are killing each other – deliberately so, even – and when I make some art where the people in the audience can't pat each others' shoulders and then leave the auditorium feeling good about things, is that already provocation? I don't know. I don't

think it's provocation. I shake the audience a little and I tell about what I feel, what makes me happy and angry and if that is too much to bear, maybe you should step out of this parallel world and take a look at what is happening elsewhere...

Who do you imagine as an audience while you work?

I think it is really important to know my audience. Not personally, but who the target group in the cinema or the theatre is: that is really important for the narrative. For example, I am not going to make fun of our lefty culture echo chamber in a play when I know the audience is right-wing. I also always try to irritate the expectations of the audience. I lead them on a path and then like to surprise them with something else, maybe to expand the audience's horizons and invite them to self-reflect. My works also usually have an open and even more confusing end, because I don't want to send the audience home satisfied, completed and happy. I want to stay with them and remain in their heads.

The Islamic world and the social media world play a central role in your films. How do you see the relationship between those two realities?

Every reality plays a role on social media – that includes religion and God. God has been on the internet for a long time.

Who or what is the White Widow?

The White Widow was or is still the most wanted terrorist. So it is not known whether she is still alive. She was a European woman who thought that she was the best Muslima in the world and that is why she thought she had to kill other people. I think it's pretty weird.

In *Sun* (2022) you worked with teenagers, in *Moon* (2024) with choreographer Florentina Holzinger and now for *White Widow* with rapper addeN, the Austrian film star Georg Friedrich and a dance chorus. How does your casting come together and what comes first: the protagonists or the content of the project?

The content is first, definitely. But the content changes through the casting, which is a very important process for me. But I get to know the people who take part very well and they get to know me

very well. They all know the book, but I never want them to prepare. We also never rehearse directly what it says in my books, but similar situations or entirely different situations that might have happened in the characters' past. But it is not all improvised and spontaneous. The actions in the scenes in the film and the play are determined at some point, and then when we start filming, for example, then we are already very used to improvising in front of the camera. And when I say improvise, then I mean that the actors speak as they would speak normally – not dialogues they learnt off by heart. But it is prescribed how the character reacts and what the dialogues are about. In the theatre we also changed the text by improvisation during the rehearsals, but they did have to go on to learn the transcribed text. And that was new for me. So I had to stage particular lines individually and direct with the text. That was pretty cool.

In *Moon*, Florentina Holzinger plays a martial artist who experiences a sense of impotence as a personal trainer in Jordan because she simply cannot change anything about the way things are. You seem to have a great scope to shape and create, you are rightly

receiving accolades for your work and so you'd have grounds to have a positive outlook. What connects you to the topic of impotence?

Hm. Well. Life. How the world works. I think where I am from and how I grew up gave me certain insights ... I did experience a lot of heavy stuff, I would say. Sometimes you are delivered to your own feelings and cannot control them, and sometimes you are delivered to the road that's been mapped out for you and you cannot change it.

You once described yourself as a woman who does as she likes while being told by many people what she shouldn't be doing. What is your lodestar on this path?

Do it anyway. 😊

How did the spider get into the stage set?

Well... I always use real locations in film, I like reusing things and it was the same with the stage set. I wanted to take a look at what there was. And then the stage designer Nina von Mechow showed me the spider. It was on stage for René Pollesch in Munich and then never again. I saw it and wanted to have it straight

away. The spider in the play is pet, mother, reason, family and a carnivore.

**I DON'T HAVE A HOME.
MY HOME IS MY FAMILY,
AND I HAVE ALWAYS
BEEN SUSPICIOUS
OF COUNTRIES AND
BORDERS**

You live in Vienna and work a lot with Austrians? What role does Austria play in your work?

I do like Austria. That morbid, dark, cynical side. And yes, I grew up here. Yet: I don't have a home. My home is my family, and I have always been suspicious of countries and borders, because you cannot choose where you are born, that is not an achievement. And borders, those were also drawn by other people, so Austria is the people around me and they are weird, but that is fun.

The interview was conducted in writing by Tarun Kade (Vienna Festival (Wiener Festwochen) | Free Republic of Vienna, May 2025).

BIOGRAPHY

Kurdwin Ayub was born in Iraq in 1990 and is a director, scriptwriter and artist. She studied painting and animated film at the University of Applied Arts as well as performative art at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. Her performative works, animated films, music videos as well as documentary films in short and feature-length formats have been shown on numerous film festivals and exhibitions across the world since 2010. In her works, she plays with social clichés and brings her audience to question their own political situation. Her first feature-length film, the documentary film *Paradise! Paradise!*, for which Ayub directed, wrote the script and was behind the camera, was shown on international film festivals and awarded the New Waves Non-Fiction Award at Seville European Film Festival 2016 and the Carte Blanche newcomer award at Duisburg Filmwoche in 2016. Her first feature film *Sun* premiered in 2022 in the 'Encounters' section at the Berlinale Competition and was awarded the prize for the best first film. The film was also nominated for the European Discovery Award at the 35th European Film Awards. Her second feature film *Moon* with Florentina Holzinger and Andria Tayeh in the main roles had its world premiere at the Locarno Film Festival competition in 2024 and received the Special Jury Prize.

PUBLICATION DETAILS

Owner, Editor and Publisher Wiener Festwochen GesmbH, Lehnargasse 11/1/6, 1060 Wien T + 43 1 589 22 0
festwochen@festwochen.at | www.festwochen.at **General Management** Milo Rau, Artemis Vakianis **Artistic Direction** (responsible for content) Milo Rau (Artistic Director) **Picture Credit** Cover © Apollonia T. Bitzan **Produced by** Print Alliance HAV Produktions GmbH (Bad Vöslau) **Design** SIRENE Studio **Layout** Valerie Eccli

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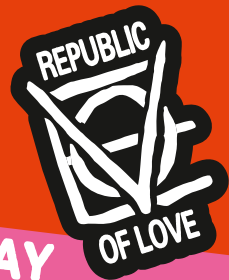
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