

THEATRE COPRODUCTION

TANZENDE IDIOTEN *DANCING IDIOTS*

THORSTEN LENSING

*with texts by Denis Johnson and original quotes
from NASA's Apollo missions to the moon*

FREE
REPUBLIC OF
VIENNA
FESTIVAL

17 – 20 May
Akademietheater

Goldie does what she likes doing best: she remodels her house. Her joy is infectious and unsettling in equal measure, because Goldie is critically ill. She wants to give her all with a body that is giving up on her. Her cat Apollo enjoys Goldie's increasing weakness – finally he can sit on her lap and snore to his heart's content for what seems like hours on end. Suddenly Goldie's father, newly in love, arrives with his girlfriend. The deliriously happy father finds himself at his daughter's deathbed. He believes that he is at a new beginning, she knows she is at the end. Once again, the whole world floods into Goldie's room, everything that's hard to say goodbye to; forests, animals, the sea. The second part of the evening recounts Goldie's dying. The habitat of Earth is transcended and within seconds the small room becomes outer space. A cleverly constructed play full of existential angst and lust for life.

Language
German

Surtitles
English

Duration
2 hrs 45 mins,
including 1 intermission


barrier-free access

Q&A
18 May, following
the performance

‘Here, absurd, comic, existential theatre is staged.
The most quintessential theatrical themes of life, death,
and transformation are presented with a lightness that
only an ensemble of this calibre can achieve. [...]’
A consoling theatre of existence that truly begins to
dance – if one allows it to.’

RBB / BARBARA BEHRENDT

Text, Direction Thorsten Lensing **With** Sebastian Blomberg (Apollo the cat, Neil Armstrong), Benjamin Eggers-Domsky (construction worker, sauna master), André Jung (Tony), Ursina Lardi (Goldie), Karin Neuhäuser (Vivian Phoenix), and Willi Kellers (musician) **Collaboration direction** Benjamin Eggers-Domsky **Set design** Gordian Blumenthal, Ramun Capaul **Costume design** Anette Guthier, Nuria Heyck **Dramaturgy** Dan Kolber, Thierry Mousset **Dramaturgical, artistic collaboration** Anne Inken Bickert **Photography** Armin Smailovic **Production management** Eva-Karen Tittmann, Philip Decker **Technical direction** Michael Klatt **Management stage production** Martina Schulle **Translation surtitles** Emily Pollak **Surtitles** Anne Hirth

Production Thorsten Lensing **Coproduction** Vienna Festival (Wiener Festwochen) | Free Republic of Vienna, Berliner Festspiele, Les Théâtres de la Ville de Luxembourg, Kampnagel Internationale Kulturfabrik Hamburg, Schauspiel Stuttgart, Asphalt Festival Düsseldorf, Kurtheater Baden, Theater im Pumpenhaus Münster (funded by Kunststiftung NRW) **Supported by** Hauptstadtkulturfonds Berlin and the City of Münster

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

‘Jesus’ Son’

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‘Resuscitation of a Hanged Man’

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‘The Largesse of the Sea Maiden’

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AS MUCH LIFE AS POSSIBLE

NOTES FROM THE REHEARSALS FOR *DANCING IDIOTS*
BY DAN KOLBER, DRAMATURG OF THE PRODUCTION

One of the first rehearsals for *Dancing Idiots* took place without the actors. It was a rehearsal to practice the opening scene, when wooden beams drop from the ceiling. My first impression: the stage comes flying in.

The play, which ends in absence, begins with a creation: the making of space. From light and the crash of boards, a world takes shape before our eyes. Hard and edgy, this world seems inhospitable, and yet it is also gentle. The first living creature appears, a cat.

Sebastian Blomberg is staring ahead on all fours. The cat brings along its own silence. Its eyes witness things we cannot see and its ears pick up sounds that our human ears cannot hear. We sense the cat's attention being drawn to things beyond our perception. Another reality seems to surround it. The cat is crouching just in front of me. Its gaze glides past me. It does not seem to perceive me as a person. I am of no importance to it, yet it never treats me as if I were absent. In rehearsals, Sebastian Blomberg seeks to capture this fascinating indifference of a gaze – one that expects no glance in return. What strikes me as beautiful is not only that a cat appears in the play, but that an actor can evoke in me

a sensation I otherwise know only from the presence of a real animal.

At second glance, I notice the human eyebrows, the nose, the mouth and the beard. The foreign and the familiar suddenly merge, like a sphinx. For a moment, Sebastian Blomberg is neither simply human, nor merely a cat; he appears as a hybrid creature. I am reminded of one of the oldest known works of art in human history: the Lion Man of Hohlenstein-Stadel. Carved from mammoth ivory some 40,000 years ago and measuring around thirty centimetres in height, the sculpture depicts a human figure with the head and limbs of a lion. To this day, its meaning remains unknown.

The seemingly hostile world contains food. The cat discovers a fish and devours it. As domesticated predators, cats resemble the humans in this piece. The quest for life in one animal means death for another. Set to the rhythm of chewing, swallowing, gagging and smacking, I witness the crushing of a living creature during a morning rehearsal. When I see the remains of the fish in the cat's open mouth, life and death collapse into a single image. In this play the lovable and the dangerous

are never mutually exclusive; they are either present at the same time or reveal themselves in rapid succession.

Theatre without animals is a world with a strange void. The emotional range of theatre is often confined to the human. And yet, in this performance, the first and last character to appear is a cat. The absence of humans allows me to see them differently once they do appear on stage.

Each character in this play is defined not only by what they say, but by their bodies – their physical presence and condition. Goldie, whose consciousness is marked by strength, inhabits a body that steadily weakens until it becomes completely immobile. Apollo, the cat, lives in a body fundamentally different from our own. Tony and Vivian, bearing the marks of age and a long life, set out to explore one another's bodies; discovering bullet holes, scars and wedding rings that speak of who they are.

In this play, the elderly are the survivors. The zest for life is not bound to age. Vivian and Tony do not settle for less in their old age. Karin Neuhäuser and André Jung attempt to practice kayaking in Goldie's room and for a moment they succeed, gliding weightlessly. Although this feels like a kind of happy ending in the middle of the play, the future of this couple is uncertain and fragile.

We all die on a construction site. We die unfinished. The construction site reveals that Goldie is both preparing for her

death and fleeing from it. She believes she will be able to die more easily in the remodeled room. At the same time, the building materials and tools embody a confidence that she will remain alive, to keep building, to keep transforming the world. The wooden boards Goldie clings to are an escape into a confidence that, being mortally ill, she can no longer sustain.

For most of the play, Goldie appears alongside the cat. Through Apollo, we draw close to her – not only physically. She confides in him something she has never told anyone before. Ursina Lardi does more than recount what happened to Goldie during a sales training involving animals; she exposes the experience of her own guilt. Goldie becomes unsettling to Apollo – and to herself. Closeness to the animal turns into distance. Shortly before her death, Goldie becomes a stranger to herself.

The first astronauts on the moon were beginners, like anyone who is dying. Both are exposed to the unknown, dependent on help at every moment. The NASA logbooks reveal that humanity's encounter with a completely different world also has a comical side. Goldie's moon landing draws largely from original NASA quotations.

Denis Johnson¹ wanted to land on the moon himself. He even wrote a letter to NASA, applying to become an astronaut. There are two ways of leaving Earth: by traveling into space and by dying. Goldie's dying marks the

second half of the play. It begins with her departure from Earth and leads us to her final moments. Goldie's moon landing traces her withdrawal from Earth. Illness has altered her way of seeing the world, setting her apart from those around her. Against her will, she lives in the extreme place that Vivian deliberately seeks out again and again: the place closest to death.

A lifeless body is cold. Shortly before her death, Goldie experiences the warmth of life once more. In the sauna and through dance, the body heats up. Goldie's final dance is not only a farewell to life, but also a last memory of life's intensity.

Actors who play someone dying are performing their own future. At some point, that future narrows to the second before death – the final heartbeat. Lensing uses the tools of theatre to enter this moment and stretch it out, revealing a whole range of human experience contained in this tiny unit of time.

The lives of theatre characters come to an end when the actors no longer play them. That is why Goldie dies the moment Ursina Lardi returns to being only Ursina Lardi on stage. In the final scene, the cat is alone. It waits for Goldie. With each passing minute, the cat gradually realises that its beloved owner will never return. When death is seen through the eyes of an animal, its mystery becomes all the more palpable.

¹ Denis Johnson (1949–2017) was an US American writer whose precise, poetic language and profoundly human characters made him one of the most distinctive voices in American literature.

BIOGRAPHY

Thorsten Lensing (*1969) is a freelance director from Germany. In his work, he engages with the existential questions of life with great seriousness and humour, and, using the very simplest theatrical means, reaches the essence of performance.

Lensing devotes a great deal of time to research, rehearsals and refinement for each of his plays. A new production emerges roughly every three years – always in close collaboration with a select group of top-class actors and actresses, and as an independent production outside any fixed institutional framework. To date, he has realised projects with international coproduction partners such as the Salzburg and Berlin Festivals, the Munich Kammerspiele and the Schauspielhaus Zürich.

Lensing became known primarily for his literary adaptations, including Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, for which he won the Friedrich Luft Prize in 2014, which was invited to the Berliner Theatertreffen in 2019 as well as *Infinite Jest* by David Foster Wallace. With *Verrückt nach Trost*, he wrote his first original play, which was performed with his long-standing collaborators Sebastian Blomberg, André Jung, Ursina Lardi and Devid Striesow. This year, he is appearing for the first time at the Vienna Festival | Free Republic of Vienna.

PUBLICATION DETAILS

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