

PER BOYE HANSEN

Artistic Director of the National Theatre Opera and the State Opera

opera

One big party at the State Opera!

Musica non grata introduces *Ball im Savoy*

A light-hearted muse will take the reins at the State Opera. After eighty-nine years, *Ball im Savoy*, an operetta revue by the Hungarian composer Paul Abraham, premieres on 16th and 18th September directed by Martin Čičvák and conducted by Jan Kučera. Paul Abraham was the uncrowned “king of jazz opera”, whose stellar career was ended by the rise of Nazism in 1933. The production is a part of Musica non grata, an international music and cultural project of the Czech Republic and Germany, initiated and organized by the National Theatre in Prague and financially supported by the Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany.

“*Ball im Savoy* combines operetta, opera, dance and also pretty demanding acting almost as Oscar Wilde’s style acting” says the Slovak stage director, **Martin Čičvák**. “For me, this is a kind of feminist initiation, a story about a girl, who stands up for herself, her rights and grows from a girl into a woman,” he adds.

A piece full of unexpected twists, brimming with energy and wit, *Ball im Savoy* was composed in Berlin in 1932 as the last in the series of Abraham’s most successful operettas – *Victoria and her Hussar*, *The Flower of Hawaii* and *Ball im Savoy*. The premiere took place at the Großes Schauspielhaus in Berlin on 23 December 1932. However, when Adolf Hitler rose to the office of the chancellor, the piece was banned throughout Germany, just like the rest of Abraham’s works, forcing the author to flee Germany due to his Jewish origin. He first turned to Hungary but continued to Paris after the world war broke out. In the end, he was forced to emigrate to the USA after staying in Havana, Cuba, for a few months. The man, who used to be nicknamed “king of jazz operetta” in Europe of the 1930s, spent his last fourteen years as a mentally ill patient of various psychiatric institutions.

Despite the difficult time of its composition, *Ball im Savoy* is a work of great humour and elegance, reminding us of the naïve film comedies of the First Czechoslovak Republic. But there is more to the piece according to Martin Čičvák. “*Ball im Savoy* can be understood simply as a ticket to a carefree world, but I feel that it is our duty to work with all the themes included and present all the characters to their full extent,” he says. “Telling this story with all its aspects, this will be a real ride. And it should be one hell of a ride! One never-ending party – but terrible things undreamt of tend to happen at parties. And that is the way, in which *Ball im Savoy* is written. It is a ball at the Savoy, but its rooms are dark and – in spite of all the elegance and humor – a great tragedy can take place there or at least things resulting in heavy moral hangovers,” he adds.

The music and instrumentation of the operetta is another of its immensely interesting aspects. “*Ball im Savoy* is full of inspiring and innovative songs building on dances popular at the time – foxtrot, slow fox, tango, pasodoble and of course slow waltz. There are characters bringing overtones of exotic music, such as the Turkish ambassador Mustapha Bey accompanied by music of Arabic feel.

This is a work truly enchanted by jazz that resounded all over Europe in the 1930s but it also reminiscent of the regularly structured melodies that we may know, for example, from Lehár's operettas," says the conductor **Jan Kučera**, who is in charge of the musical preparation of the piece. "Paul Abraham was an incredibly modern composer, presenting us even with a kind of proto-rap without being aware of it," says Jan Kučera. Also the instrumentation of *Ball im Savoy* is far from traditional – using a large-scale symphony orchestra but also rhythmic jazz band including many unusual instruments: banjo, special types of guitars, mandolin, piano, celesta, vibraphone and many others. A contemporary drum kit was also borrowed to be used during the performances. "We aim at being acoustically authentic," adds Jan Kučera. Even though the operetta demands a large ensemble, music similar to that performed by a salon orchestra can also be heard on occasions. Abraham also frequently employs solo instruments.

The new production prepared by the National Theatre Opera and the State Opera also emphasises the visual aspect of the work. The story takes place in Nice on the French Riviera and the production draws from the poetic feeling of the 1930s combined with universal elegance and style. "Our costumes are inspired by the French "haute couture" fashion because the story takes place in France," says **Georges Vafias**, a costume designer of Greek and French origin. "The style of the costumes refers to trends from the 1960s up until now, i.e. a period – from our European perspective – of living a carefree life but also pondering the future of the world. But *Ball im Savoy* costumes also express the fragile future of a love, of a couple and an individual," Vafias explains his take on the costume design. "*Ball im Savoy* is a story of desire. As Jean Cocteau put it: The prettiest dresses are worn to be taken off. That is why I focused on men of elegance and style, and I was thinking of Dior, Yves Saint Laurent, musical theatre and cabaret when creating costumes for the women, shifting the design to have a more modern feel. All the costumes were created at the National Theatre's workshops with great skill," adds Georges Vafias.

It has been eighty-nine years since *Ball im Savoy* was last performed at the State Opera on 9 September 1933. The production team was led by the conductor Paul Kamlah and the stage director Renato Mordó. "They were both among the leading personalities of the New German Theatre and, being both Jewish, they were forced to leave Europe just like Abraham himself," says Jitka Slavíková, dramaturge of the Opera. "The stage was designed by Emil Pirchan, born in Brno but recognized for his modern understanding of stage design internationally. As a chief stage designer, he created sets for fifty operas, operettas and dramas at the New German Theatre, including Smetana's *Dalibor* in 1930. From 1936, he worked as a stage designer for the Burgtheater in Vienna."

In addition to numerous stage productions, *Ball im Savoy* was also adapted for the cinema six times, making it one of the most successful operettas of the 20th century. The new Prague production will feature a cast including **Vanda Šípová, Doubravka Součková, Jiří Hájek, Csaba Kotlár, Josef Moravec, Tomáš Kořínek, Daniel Matoušek, Barbora Řeřichová, Lucie Hájková, Vladimír Kratina, Richard Haan, Linda Fernandez, Angela Nwagbo** and many others. Spectators can look forward to spectacular dance scenes performed by the special **dance company** and the **State Opera Chorus**. The piece will be performed in the Czech translation by **Vlasta Reittererová** with two alternating casts, each an original with a different atmosphere and interpretation of the characters. This work is also the first production of the Musica non grata cycle to remain on the repertoire of the National Theatre Opera and the State Opera. Eighteen more performances are scheduled until the end of the season, including one on the New Year's Eve as a part of the popular New Year's Eve in Opera. Please find more information and ticket reservations on www.musicanongrata.cz and www.narodni-divadlo.cz.

Ball at the Savoy

Music: Paul Abraham (1892–1960)

Libretto: Alfred Grünwald (1884–1951) & Fritz Löhner-Beda (1883–1942)

Czech translation of sung texts and Czech dialogues by Vlasta Reittererová

Production information: <https://bit.ly/3QlbYf4>

The performance is amplified.

Premieres at the State Opera on 16th and 18th September 2022

Further performances: 2022: 22/9, 27/9, 30/9, 6/10, 12/10, 15/10, 8/12, 17/12, 28/12, 31/12.
2023: 6/4, 12/4, 20/4, 29/4, 7/5, 13/5, 4/6, 10/6.

Photo gallery:

Web quality (72 dpi):

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Historic photos:

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Photo gallery for Ball im Savoy campaign

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Production team

Conductor: Jan Kučera

Stage direction: Martin Čičvák

Stage design: Hans Hoffer

Video projection: Michael Hoffer

Costume design: Georges Vafias

Lighting design: Jan Dörner

Choreography: Laco Cmorej, Silvia Beláková

Chorus master: Adolf Melichar

Dramaturge: Jitka Slavíková

Cast:

Madeleine de Faublas: Vanda Šípová / Doubravka Součková
Marquis Aristide de Faublas, her husband: Csaba Kotlár / Jiří Hájek
Daisy Parker alias José Pasodoble, jazz composer: Lucie Hájková / Barbora Řeřichová
Mustapha Bey, Turkish ambassador: Tomáš Kořínek / Josef Moravec / Daniel Matoušek
Tangolita, Argentine dancer: Angela Nwagbo / Linda Fernandez
Archibald, Aristide's servant: Vladimír Kratina / Richard Haan
Célestin Formant, lawyer: Marek Frňka / Jakub Svojanovský / Viktor Javořík
René: Petr Jeřábek / Marek Frňka
Head of a fashion house: Marek Frňka / Zbyněk Šporc
Headwaiter: Štěpán Piller / Petr Špínar
Bebé: Elena Trčková / Barbora Šampalíková
Paulette: Barbora Šampalíková / Kristýna Štarhová
Lilly: Alžběta Trembecká / Markéta Šandová

Female company

Adéla Abdul Khaleg, Zuzana Hladká, Tereza Holubová, Anna Kafková, Eliška Kenclová, Klára Kočárková, Anna Metlická, Karolína Pampelová, Barbora Šampalíková, Markéta Šandová, Kristýna Štarhová, Klára Šútovská, Alžběta Trembecká

Male company

Jan Adam, Martin Dinuš, Marek Frňka, Petr Jeřábek, Jevgenij Lisovik, David Mikula, Štěpán Piller, Jakub Ressler, Daniel Rybicki, Michal Soukup, Petr Špínar, Zbyněk Šporc

State Opera Orchestra

State Opera Chorus

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...and yet it still resounds! musicanongrata.cz



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