



play

## The Invisible Hand

A dearly relevant play about a clash of disparate cultures with more in common than first meets the eye.

by Rory McCuckie

With Vienna in a mood of high alert after the deadly Islamist attacks in Paris on November 13, and the violent sexual assaults on hundreds of German women by alcohol-fueled migrants at the Cologne Train Station on New Year's Eve, relevance can be a hard call. One might prefer the relief of escapist fantasy, or the diversion of drawing-room comedy. Thus it is a courageous choice for the Vienna Theatre Project to stage Ayad Akhtar's *The Invisible Hand*, a European premiere that taps into anxieties about terrorism and the wider threats to social stability and values.

Set in Pakistan, this tension-riddled drama follows the fate of Nick Bright (Dave Moskin), an American banker kidnapped and held for ransom by the followers of Imam Saleem (David Wurawa) charismatic leader recently added to the U.S. terrorists' list. This makes it impossible to ne-

gotiate for Nick's release, but does little to prevent Bashir (Michael Smulik), one of Bright's captors, from demanding \$10 million in ransom.

### POWER PLAY

Faced with the threat of being handed over to Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, (the terrorists linked to the 2012 murder of journalist Daniel Pearl), Bright convinces his abductors to use his knowledge of finance to obtain their ransom in spite of American policy. If he can do it in under a year, he can go free, setting the ground for an irony-laced exploration of rapacious capitalism, religious fundamentalism and the impact of western intervention in the Middle East.

Under the direction of VTP chief, Joanna Godwin-Seidl, and with powerful performances from Smulik and Moskin in the leading roles, *The In-*

Set in Pakistan, this tension-riddled drama follows the fate of Nick Bright (Dave Moskin), an kidnapped American banker. Bashir (Michael Smulik, shown here), one of Bright's captors, demands \$10 million in ransom.

PHOTOS: CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: PAMAMOUNT PICTURES/GERMANY; VIENNA'S ENGLISH THEATRE



The play takes its title from Adam Smith, to describe how economic agents are led as if by "an invisible hand" to make decisions in the interests of society.

With a claustrophobic set design (Richard Panzenboeck) that amplifies the characters' frayed tempers, director Godwin-Seidl highlights the pervasive reach of avarice in human affairs, in circumstances that have become all too close to the fears we live with every day.

The task of theater, wrote Shakespeare, is "to hold a mirror up to nature, to show... the very age and body of the time his form and pressure." Bringing *The Invisible Hand* to Europe in the present climate is a shrewd and relevant choice from the VTP, and one in which we find the form and nature of our own time reflected unflinchingly back to us.

39 Feb 8-20 (except 10 and 14), 20:00, Theater Drachengasse

play

## Groupie

Middle-age melancholia takes center stage as Vienna's English Theatre puts on Arnold Wesker's ultimately optimistic play about life after 50



Anne Kavanagh and Brian Deacon lock horns in Arnold Wesker's *Groupie*

With a plot that initially sounds like a psycho-thriller – woman stalks celebrity and insinuates herself in his life against his will – *Groupie* instead goes the other way, exploring the loneliness, hopes and dreams of the autumn years. Matty Beancourt, an aging Cockney lady, feels connected to famous painter Mark Gorman after reading his autobiography and discovering he grew up on the same East End streets as her. Despite his less-than-enthusiastic replies to her letters, the persistent Matty keeps writing to the curmudgeonly artist, eventually deciding to visit her idol uninvited. When she finds Mark living

destitute and neglected, she immediately starts fussing over him as he tries – and fails – to get away. Matty's sunny naivité soon clashes with Mark's frustrated, bleak outlook, only gradually settling into tentative affection and a precarious friendship during the course of the play. Penned by the legendary British dramatist Sir Arnold Wesker (himself turning 84 this year) in 2001 as a radio play for BBC 4, the production stars veteran actors Anne Kavanagh (last seen here in 2010's *Six Dance Lessons in Six Weeks*) and Brian Deacon and is directed by Andrew Hall.

42 Through Feb 20 (except Sun), 19:30, Vienna's English Theatre