



*The colourful cast of last year's production of Lend me a Tenor seem suitably surprised to hear the theatre's true age*

Photo: Vienna's English Theatre

*With the opening of Dear Liar, Europe's oldest foreign language stage marks a full half-century*

# Fifty Years of Theatre in English

by Alice Miller

In 1963, Ruth Brinkmann premiered in *Dear Liar* in Vienna, performing in her wedding dress. An American, recently graduated from Yale University School of Drama and determined to be an actress, Brinkman had come to Europe for a year abroad, before getting down to building a career in America. But in Vienna, she wandered into Café Hawelka, met an Austrian dramaturg named Franz Schafranek, and fell in love.

Brinkmann's new beau convinced her to stay in Vienna a little longer. They married and staged that first production in a basement theatre in the city's 1st District. Brinkmann acted,

while Schafranek directed the show, worked the lights, and sold the tickets.

Fifty years on, to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the theatre, their daughter Julia Schafranek will produce the same show, which opens this September.

## A curtsy for Princess Grace

At first the theatre was simply intended as summer entertainment for tourists. But Brinkmann and Schafranek soon found that there was also a large Viennese audience interested in the language and literature of the English-speaking stage. Following enthusiastic reviews, the theatre quickly extended its season to cover

the entire year, and shifted to larger premises. It was the first professional foreign language theatre on the European continent.

"It was always fully professional, with no compromise," director Julia Schafranek told *The Vienna Review*. Cast and crew are still recruited from London and New York, with the aim of producing shows that can compete with Broadway and the West End.

Many renowned actors, writers, and directors have performed under the beautiful ceiling in the theatre auditorium. In 1976, Tennessee Williams directed the world premiere of his own

*Continued on page 18* ▷





**Theatre founders Ruth Brinkmann and Franz Schafranek glance stage right** Photo: English Theatre

*The Red Devil Battery Sign*, and in 1991, Edward Albee directed the world premiere of his Pulitzer Prize winning *Three Tall Women*. Over the last fifty years, casts have included Joan Fontaine, Anthony Quinn, Princess Grace of Monaco, Leslie Nielsen, and Dame Judi Dench, as well as French legends Jeanne Moreau, Jean-Louis Barrault and Jean-Paul Belmondo.

As daughter of the founders, Schafranek grew up immersed in the theatrical world. Her first time on stage was delivering flowers to Princess Grace, who was involved in two charity evenings at the theatre. Schafranek, then around ten years old, had to rehearse her curtsy with the princess' lady-in-waiting. After careful practice, the very nervous Schafranek was surprised on stage when following her curtsy, Princess Grace stepped forward and enveloped her in a hug.

#### **Dear Liar**

Since the first production of *Dear Liar* in 1963, the theatre has received considerable recognition for its many productions. The theatre has presented a broad range of work – premieres from celebrated American, English, Canadian, and Australian playwrights, as well as countless

English-language classics, thrillers, contemporary drama, comedies and farces, and occasional French or Italian productions. For their work in the theatre, Franz Schafranek was awarded an O.B.E. and Ruth Brinkmann an M.B.E., honours not often accorded non-British subjects. In 2004, the theatre was awarded the Nestroy Prize for forty years of distinguished achievement.

The opening play of the theatre's 50th anniversary season is based on the correspondence between the playwright Bernard Shaw and the renowned actress known as Mrs Patrick Campbell. The irreverent and sometimes aggressive letters between the actress "Stella" and "Joey" (as she called Shaw) form a dramatic and passionate affair. In Schafranek's words, it is a play about "two people who were passionate about



**Julia Schafranek, artistic & executive director, has always been immersed in a theatrical world**

Photo: English Theatre

the theatre," making it extremely appropriate for the theatre's founding piece. Schafranek's mother played the part of Stella multiple times over the years.

#### **The theatrical century**

Since Schafranek took over as director 17 years ago, she has continued her parents' tradition of excellent theatre with no compromise. "You don't change a winning team," she says. She remains committed for the next decades to produce "the best standard of productions we can achieve." Recent shows have included the European premiere of John Patrick Shanley's *Doubt*, and *God of Carnage* by Yasmina Reza, translated by Christopher Hampton.

While in German-language theatre, the emphasis can be on the director's vision, Schafranek says that at her theatre, the primary focus remains on the play itself. The anniversary season includes an enticing line-up of shows, including Agatha Christie's *Witness for the Prosecution*, and Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*. In January, joining in the celebrations will be Chicago's Second City Comedy Club, returning to the theatre with brand new sketches, satires, and improvisation.

In recent times, funding has tightened, and now the theatre is especially dependent on its subscribers, which currently number 5,000 – many of whom have been loyal to the theatre since its earliest days. Schafranek remains committed to producing excellent theatre for her audiences, and she is hopeful that in a couple of decades, one of her three children will step in to continue the family tradition. We can expect to see many more exceptional actors and directors offering brilliant theatre for the next half-century. ◇

#### *Dear Liar*

9 Sept. – 19 Oct.

Gala-Night on Tue. 10 Sept., 19:30

Vienna's English Theatre

8., Josefgasse 12

Tickets available online at

[www.englishtheatre.at](http://www.englishtheatre.at)

*Exhibition on the history of the Vienna's English Theatre*

Bezirksmuseum Josefstadt

8., Schmidgasse 18

25 Sept. 2013 – Apr. 2014