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Ressort: Kunst, Kultur und Musik

A hypochondriac for the present

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The Bregenz Festival's *Der eingebildete Kranke* is a sharp, delightfully unsettling reminder that Molière's last play is not just a period comedy about a hypochondriac, but a highly adaptable critique of how we instrumentalise sickness, care and vulnerability. In Stefan Bachmann's production, brought to the Bodensee as a guest performance by the Burgtheater in collaboration with Schauspiel Köln.

The piece emerges as a thoroughly contemporary satire, written anew by Barbara Sommer and Plinio Bachmann without losing the structural brilliance of the 1673 original. Bachmann's staging takes Argan's obsession with his own imagined illnesses and turns it into a mirror of present-day cultures of self-focus and "Befindlichkeiten." The production foregrounds what the Burgtheater itself has described as a "competition for the highly questionable honour of being the most vulnerable": everyone around Argan, from family members to doctors, is drawn into a game where suffering becomes a currency, and where being sick or hurt functions as a way to claim attention, moral capital or economic advantage.

This approach reactivates Molière's core critique of the medical profession—his portrayal of greedy, jargon-spouting doctors and their Latin gibberish—in a way that resonates with current debates about health systems, pharmaceutical interests and the psychological economy of care. It also makes Argan less quaint and more disturbingly familiar: his self-pity, his craving for treatment, his desire to control his environment through illness feel very close to our own ambivalent relationship to health, anxiety and the body.

Sommer and Bachmann's adaptation deserves particular praise. Rather than simply modernising vocabulary or adding topical jokes, they work with a deeper shift: the language is fast, rhythmically alive, and constantly oscillates between high and low registers. Classical comedy structures—set-ups, reversals, asides—remain intact, but the verbal surface carries references to political correctness, identity politics and the pervasive habit of turning every discomfort into a moral claim.

The performance keeps the original plot clear while infusing it with present tense, avoiding the museum effect that can plague canonical comedies. The result is a text that feels nimble and precise, capable of switching from slapstick to genuine insight in a matter of lines. Bachmann's direction combines the Burgtheater's ensemble strength with an aesthetic that is visually striking yet not overburdened. The stage design works with a stylised domestic space that can slide toward the grotesque—medical props, charts, furniture that almost seems to vibrate under the weight of Argan's obsessions.

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Within this frame, the actors move with a fine sense of physical comedy: timing, gesture and spatial relations are used to underline the absurdity of situations without tipping into cartoonish exaggeration. Argan himself is played as a man who oscillates between genuine fear and manipulative theatrics. His reliance on therapy, treatments and “Einläufe” becomes almost ritualistic, a daily choreography of self-diagnosis that the production stages with both humour and faint horror. The women around him—Toinette, his clever maid; his daughters; and the various figures trying to navigate his demands—are drawn with clarity and energy, making the gendered dimensions of dependence and control palpable.

A special feature of this *Eingebildete Kranke* is the presence of live music on stage, which adds a Brechtian touch: musicians comment, underline and occasionally contradict the action, turning Argan’s domestic world into a kind of gently estranged theatre machine. The music avoids decorative pastiche; instead, it creates rhythmic frames that sharpen the actors’ work, supporting the piece’s mix of farce and reflection. Programming Molière’s *Der eingebildete Kranke* at the Bregenz Festival—as a three-night run at the Theater am Kornmarkt—fits the festival’s broader 2026 theme of “Zwischen Wunsch und Wirklichkeit” (“Between wish and reality”).

Argan’s desire to control his fate through medicine, contracts and family arrangements is a textbook case of wish colliding with reality, and the production elegantly threads this into the season’s larger exploration of illusions, self-deception and the social structures that enable them. The guest appearance of the Burgtheater also continues Bregenz’s tradition of inviting major German-language stages to contribute spoken theatre to a programme otherwise dominated by opera and music theatre. In that context, *Der eingebildete Kranke* offers audiences a chance to see how a classic can be rethought without losing its bite.

As a theatrical experience, this *Eingebildete Kranke* is both funny and unnerving. It confirms how enduring Molière’s diagnosis of human folly is, while showing that contemporary theatre can add new layers of relevance through intelligent adaptation and precise staging. Instead of treating Argan’s hypochondria as an amusing eccentricity safely locked in the 17th century, Bachmann and his team bring it into direct conversation with our own age of health anxiety, wellness obsession and identity-sensitive discourse.

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