



# ROLAND SCHIMMELPFENNIG: EXPERIMENTS IN DRAMATIC STRUCTURE

BY MELANIE DREYER

A new generation of German writers has emerged in the last ten years, most of them under 40 years of age, and they are helping reinvent storytelling on the German stage. One of these young mavericks is Roland Schimmelpfennig, who began his playwriting career in 1996 with a production of *Die ewige Maria* (*Eternal Maria*) at Theater Oberhausen. Although he originally trained as a director at the Otto-Falkenberg School in Munich, this production marked the beginning of a writing career that has flourished and progressed with surprising speed. In the last nine years, he has written 16 plays. His plays are

**Photo 1:** *Woman From the Past*. Frank (Markus Hering) and Romy Vogtländer (Christiane von Poelnitz) Scene 8. FRANK: How are you? Are you ok?

Photo: Reinhard Werner

presented regularly throughout Europe, and several have been translated into multiple languages. He worked for a short time as a director at the Munich Kammerspiele, a theatre that later produced two of his plays: *Keine Arbeit für die junge Frau im Frühlingkleid* (*No Work for the Young Woman in the Spring Dress*) in 1996 and *Die Zweifachen* (*The Duplicates*) in 1997. After the first few productions, news about Schimmelpfennig's talent spread. In 1999, Thomas Ostermeier asked him to serve as dramaturg and resident writer in Ostermeier's new company at the Schaubühne am Lehniner Platz, Berlin. At the Schaubühne Schimmelpfennig premiered *Vor Langer Zeit im Mai* (*Long Ago in May*) and *MEZ* in 2000, and *Die arabische Nacht* (*The Arabian Night*) and *Push Up 1-3* in 2001. Offers for productions and commissions at other theatres began to arrive in greater numbers, and Schimmelpfennig left the Schaubühne in 2001 to free up more time to write. Since that first production at Theater Oberhausen in 1996, Schimmelpfennig has become one of the most-produced German playwrights of his generation. His unconventional use of dramatic form, his fearless mixture of the comedic and dramatic, and his ability to address universal themes within a contemporary context make him attractive to theatre producers worldwide.

Schimmelpfennig's writing is sophisticated, sometimes whimsical, often containing unexpected dark undertones. His stories both reflect and reject the complicated perspective of a younger generation of German artists. Although one could identify consistent elements of style and theme across all of his work, his plays often seem conscious efforts to avoid repeating himself. Every Schimmelpfennig play is a study in dramatic structure. He uses form as a primary storytelling device, allowing it to manipulate and shape events. *Long Ago in May*, *The Arabian Night*, *Push Up 1-2-3*, and *Woman from the Past* vary from one another significantly in their use of structure as the driving narrative device and serve as useful platforms to examine what makes this playwright tick.

*Long Ago in May*, one of Schimmelpfennig's earliest plays, is a poetic movement piece, written in 81 short scenes. More like a musical composition than a linear narrative event, *Long Ago* presents and experiments with motifs: a man rides his bicycle in a circle and then crashes into a wall; a woman in a Rococo dress appears and disappears; two lovers stroll on and embrace; a woman trips over her suitcase, spilling its contents; another pushes a broom around the stage while singing of a past romance. In collagistic form, these motifs appear and repeat in seemingly random order, but begin to build and vary over time: multiple men ride bicycles; the woman in the dress carries the suitcase; the lovers ride on the handle bars. Interspersed among these moments of movement-based storytelling are three- to four-sentence scenes in which a man and a woman cryptically reference what we've just seen: "She: You don't say much about the bike. He: You don't say much about the suitcase. She: I asked first. What about the bike?" The poetic structure of the play

becomes the guiding device behind the storytelling, allowing the banal to function as metaphor: the bicycle of failed ambition; the spilled suitcase of hopes and dreams; the cleaning lady whose voice contains the beauty and anguish of love. Using a musical structure of theme and variation, Schimmelpfennig creates a rich landscape of experience on the topic of lost love, leaving his viewers with a collection of images, moments of true hilarity, and a sweet song to sing on the way home.

The structural device in *The Arabian Night* might be described as *Long Ago*'s opposite, overexposing rather than minimizing the experience of the play through its narrative construction. In *The Arabian Night*, Schimmelpfennig weaves a magical tale about a young woman, kidnapped as a child, who forgets her identity as the sun goes down. What begins as a recognizably realistic tale about two roommates in a Berlin apartment complex soon takes on elements of a fairy tale. We discover that the sleeping woman was kidnapped by a Turkish sheik and later cursed by one of his jealous wives: "You shall dissolve, you shall become lost, remember nothing of what you once were. Bad luck will come to any who kiss your lips, and you shall never again see the moon, until the night when you become what you are in reality." This cryptic message drives the play, as the full moon presses down on apartment 7-32, and innocent bystanders become ensnared in the witchcraft that surrounds Franziska Dehke. *The Arabian Night* freely mixes urban reality with a romanticized Turkish culture. The action occurs in multiple apartments in one large Berlin housing complex and in Istanbul, Turkey, complete with desert harems and honeymoon trips on the Bosphorus. The prince of the story who finally releases Franziska from her magical bondage with a kiss is the building superintendent.

This fairy tale turned nightmare offers a number of production obstacles. In addition to the challenging dilemma of determining how to stage the play (multiple apartments, actors running up and down a stairwell, sudden transportation to the Arabian desert), the actors must puzzle out how to play dialogue in which both their internal thoughts and their stage behavior are spoken, unfolding more like a novel than a play:

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She's lying there on the sofa. Has almost nothing on, only a towel wrapped around her—she's sleeping, and otherwise no one is here. Ms. Dehke? On the small table next to the sofa is a nearly empty bottle of Cognac. The way she's lying there—a moist film on her skin. Her short blond hair is sweaty, she's breathing fast, maybe she's dreaming.

The characters share everything they experience with the audience. Unlike the lyric collage of *Long Ago in May*, the structure of *The Arabian Night* is more a rushing river of fantasy and reality, past and present, carrying the audience along its constantly shifting current.

*Push Up 1-2-3*, written in 2001, contains a more subtle structural device. The action is primarily linear and deals with recognizable power struggles in an unidentified major corporation. This setting in actuality is a framework for the underlying substance of the play. Through a fictional situation—competition for a management position in Delhi—Schimmelpfennig exposes the loneliness and insecurities present in relationships regardless of their gender combination. The “corporate office” becomes a microcosm for society at large, whose members are compelled to claw their way to a fictional position of power, a place whose imagined benefits far outweigh the reality. Schimmelpfennig suggests that in trying to claim the prize we destroy something of greater value right in front of us, and that this carnage seems to be an inevitable part of our humanity.

The structure of the play is contained in its title. There are three major movements in this power dance. In 1., two women use an interview for the coveted position in Delhi as a mask for sexual jealousy, failing to recognize how much they have in common as they joust with one another. In 2., a man and a woman discuss the Delhi job as they play gender power politics, expressing passive-aggressive anger over a one-night stand which they each secretly thought would become something more. In 3., two men, an older mentor and his protégé, have an elliptical conversation about lifestyles and values, each certain they've already landed the job. We discover that the man who earned the right to the job through experience has been usurped by his deceptive younger colleague, whose heartlessness and relish over the victory seem unnecessarily cruel. The only straightforward voices in the play come from two security guards, one male, one female, whose innocent reflections on their employers expose the ridiculousness of this thirst for power. Schimmelpfennig places these monologues between the primary scenes. And so the structure of *Push Up 1-2-3* is neatly mathematical and perfectly gender balanced: *A. male security guard 1. two women B. male security guard 2. one man, one woman C. female security guard 3. two men D. female security guard*. The spectator is left with a sense of narrative balance—and internal unrest.

*Woman from the Past*, which premiered in September 2004 in Vienna, is a play about the vagaries and dangers of time. The play tells the story of Frank, a happily married

middle-aged man on the verge of moving to a new and wonderful place. He has a lovely wife and a well-adjusted teenage son. His life is perfect—until his old girlfriend, Romy Vogtländer, shows up and insists that he make good on a promise he made to her 24 years ago. Her arrival through the front door, which becomes a portal for bad news, precipitates a seemingly unavoidable and constantly surprising sequence of events. Here Schimmelpfennig uses the structure of the play to fracture and bend time. The action of the play takes place in the apartment in which the family members formed their history together, but we see little evidence of that. All of the furniture is gone and only moving boxes remain. The stuff of life that might testify to the solidity and reliability of their past together has already been shipped away. They are no longer in their former life, and have not yet begun to live their future. They are suspended in time. The action occurs in the hallway of the apartment—a place used only to go somewhere else. As the plot unfolds, scenes shift quickly back and forth in time, leaving the audience feeling wrenched through the narrative patchwork of events, as though on a fun-house ride. We fast-forward and rewind abruptly, often learning what will transpire before we learn what has already occurred. And as memories in life can begin in a pleasant place and then turn unexpectedly sour, we begin our experience of the play enjoying Frank's dilemma, as we recognize our own youthful folly in his innocent promise of long ago. Then bit by bit, Schimmelpfennig moves his story to a darker and more bewildering place, leaving the spectators wondering what in their past may unexpectedly rise up to haunt them.

Schimmelpfennig is a master storyteller. His unconventional use of structure, darkly funny dialogue, and dramatically compelling perspectives on contemporary society have propelled him to prominence. He won the Else-Lasker-Schüler award in 1997 for *Fisch um Fisch (Fish for Fish)*, the Schiller Memorial Award of Baden-Württemberg in 1998, and the Vienna Nestroy prize for best play in 2002 for *Push Up 1-2-3*. He has been produced at some of the most important German-language theatres: the Munich Kammerspiele, the Berlin Schaubühne, the Deutsches Schauspielhaus Hamburg, the Schauspielhaus Zurich, and the Vienna Burgtheater. Recent projects include writing the libretto for a new musical version of *Alice in Wonderland* for Schauspiel Hannover and collaborating with the National Theater of Santiago on a play about Pablo Neruda. He's written two plays this year alone, and these will undoubtedly soon see production.