

# “I’m way too confusing for people.”

**Benny Claessens**, the star of Ersan Mondtag’s *Salome* at the Gorki Theater, on being misunderstood. *By Nicholas Potter*

**B**enny Claessens is larger than life on stage. Quite literally, in Ersan Mondtag’s adaptation of Oscar Wilde’s *Salome* at Gorki – a tongue-in-cheek recognition of a phenomenal past year for the Belgian performer. Benny was crowned Actor of the Year 2018 and took home the Theatertreffen’s prestigious Alfred Kerr prize for his role in Elfriede Jelinek’s *Trumpian Am Königsweg*, directed by Falk Richter. We caught up with him over coffee to talk fame, feminism and the future of the Volksbühne.

**You’ve been friends with Ersan Mondtag for a while. Did he have you specifically in mind for *Salome*?** Ersan and I were working in Basel on *Kaspar Hauser* and wanted to do something new together. We wanted Elfriede Jelinek to write us something new but she was too busy, so we settled on *Salome*.

**How have the critics responded to *Salome* so far?** I don’t really read what the critics write anymore but I read one and they were talking about my body... *again*. They explain that I have a non-normative body and if *Salome* is about the sexualised body of the woman, then it’s a statement that I play this role. But we’re not actually making a statement about bodies, but rather how they’re perceived. You just need ears and eyes to see it. If I had listened to all those critics when I arrived in Germany, I would have quit. You need to develop some kind of resistance and I think that’s exactly what our *Salome* is about.

**Good you didn’t listen to those critics. Last year you were named Actor of the Year. How does that feel?** Obviously I’m happy about it and it feels like a big “fuck you” after the last ten years. On the other hand, I can’t use it in my work. And what happens now is that people start thinking, oh let’s see if he’s really worth it. And of course I’m not worth it. I’m not really an actor at all. Well, I’m certainly not this conventional German actor. People who want to see the show because I’m actor of the year will be disappointed. Because I don’t talk well enough. And I’m way too confusing for people who believe in such standards.

**The neon LOST sign in *Salome* is obviously a nod to Castorf’s Volksbühne. What’s Ersan trying to say here?** Theatre people think it’s some kind of smirk at the Volksbühne but it’s really a tribute to Bert Neumann who designed the iconic OST sign. I met Ersan through him actually. He was a very good friend of ours and we miss him every day. But he’s lost, he’s gone. And because he’s gone, the Volksbühne is dead. I would really like Constanza Macras and Ersan Mondtag to take it over. I don’t know if that’s going to happen but I would really wish for that instead of another guy who thinks he understands *Hedda Gabler*.<sup>1</sup>

Brecht Hupfeld



**Does casting yourself, a cis-man, in the role of an empowering woman not rob the play of its feminist potential?** No, because it’s a new play written for me by Thomaspeter Goergen. And I can talk about feminism without being a woman. The original was written by some English dandy who identified with an Arab princess. It’s more important to leave this exoticism, this orientalism behind. Oscar Wilde didn’t write a feminist piece and nor did Thomaspeter Goergen.

**The play’s ultimate conclusion is that we should give the final solution a new meaning in an act of mass suicide. Is that not a bit extreme?** I don’t think it’s too drastic. It sounds so dirty but I think this Europe is done. I also believe in destruction as a power of opening new doors. I know a lot of old, white directors and they also say that Europe must crumble. But the moment somebody non-white, non-straight and non-old comes and says, you know what, I’m going to do it for you, they suddenly all want to cling on to this Europe. For me, that’s what the end of the show’s about. How do you destroy something if you don’t allow other people to destroy it?

**Is Ersan not overstepping a line here with anti-Semitic caricatures and talk of a final solution?**

When Orit's making her Jew jokes, the German audience cringes and it's anti-Semitic. Yet 90 percent of the city's theatres still have blond people playing Nazis and that's called *Erinnerungsarbeit*. As René Pollesch said: how can we save the world if we keep on playing Nazis? German audiences are more afraid of Orit than of these Nazis on stage. My Israeli friends were laughing really hard. ■

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**Salome** Jan 13, Feb 17, 18:00, Feb 16, 19:30, with English surtitles Maxim Gorki Theater, Mitte

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