

Die Frau von früher by Roland Schimmelpfennig
Tuesday 28 May - Saturday 1 June
Burton-Taylor Studio, Oxford
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OXFORD GERMAN PLAY 2013

The author

Roland Schimmelpfennig is currently the most-performed contemporary German playwright. His plays have been translated into over 20 different languages and are performed in over 40 countries all over the world. Schimmelpfennig has won several prestigious awards for his plays as well as his work as a director. Born in 1967 in Göttingen, he worked as a Journalist in Istanbul before returning to Germany in 1990 to study directing at the renowned Otto-Falckenberg Schule in Munich. He has since worked for all major theatres in the German-speaking world and directed his own plays in the U.K and the U.S.A. Amongst the many productions of his plays was the critically acclaimed *Die Frau von früher* (*the woman before*), directed by Richard Wilson, at The Royal Court in 2005.

The play

Frank, his wife Claudia and their almost grown-up son Andi are about to emigrate to Canada. In their hallway, the only setting of the play, all their personal possessions are packed up into moving boxes. Someone is knocking on the door. It is Romy Vogtländer, Frank's first love whom, 24 years ago, he promised to love forever. To Claudia's relief, Frank eventually manages to send her away. Outside the house, Andi and his girlfriend Tina are spending their last hours together. Upon seeing Romy leaving the house they are overcome with the overwhelming urge to throw stones at her. Andi hits her on the head, she passes out. Andi and Tina carry her back into the apartment and leave for Tina's house to spend their last night together. Upon returning, Andi finds Romy in his bed when she wakes up. In the enamoured Andi, Romy sees Frank 24 years ago. She seduces him, they sleep together. Realising that Andi has in fact left his girlfriend just like Frank left her, she suffocates him and hides his corpse in his moving box. The next morning, Claudia gives Frank an ultimatum: She will leave for 20 minutes and if Romy has not disappeared when she returns, she will leave for good. Romy persuades Frank to elope with him, but when Romy also demands the ignorant Frank to leave his son behind, he refuses. Romy goes away for the last time, leaving a present for Claudia. Opening her present, Claudia is immediately engulfed in flames and burns to death, setting the whole house on fire. Frank tries to escape, finds his dead son in his moving box and the door locked from the outside.

The project

The Oxford German Play aims to explore contemporary German theatre and culture, and the interface with its British counterparts. For our first play of what will hopefully become a tradition of annual productions, we have decided to stage a play that is largely unknown and thus free of the weight of preconceived interpretations that Goethe, Brecht, Wedekind or others have to carry. At the same time, it is an exceptionally well-written play with a strong and coherent narrative making it more accessible than most other contemporary German plays. In its focus on the narrative it is representative of a recent reawakened interest in the telling of stories in German theatre, a trend that could benefit from a dialogue with the very

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strong British 'writers' theatre'. *The German Play*, however, tries to give the telling of stories 'a German twist': The play is permeated with jumps in time, going back and forth in the chronological order of events, thus dismantling the linear trajectory of story-telling. The similarities between *Die Frau von früher* and the tragic Medea myth give this dissection another possible point of reference, emphasizing and similarly questioning the role of fate in the events that take place on stage. Furthermore, we believe *Die Frau von früher* to be unique in that it conveys a very good sense of how characters and their relationships are portrayed in contemporary story-driven German theatre. Frank and Claudia live in many respects the archetypical ordinary life of German married couples. Having been married for 19 years, their entire relationship is based on an essentially rational kind of love. Both have consciously made many sacrifices to maintain their marriage and provide a stable environment for their son Andi - sacrifices they both are acutely and painfully aware of. Their planned emigration as well as Frank's susceptibility to Romy's advances can be seen as manifestations of a struggle to alleviate this pain. Frank's struggle is necessarily bound to fail as his past decisions have shaped him too much to break free from his life. In this context, Romy functions as the representation of a romantic kind of love and more generally the other life Frank could have chosen 24 years ago. While *Die Frau von früher* points out this juxtaposition and the arising struggle, it never judges; it is rather a minute analysis without pushing any interpretation. In this respect it is not only ideal on a textual and performative level to convey German theatre and culture at large, but also open for own interpretive, text-based work. The discussion above is thus to be understood as an attempt at highlighting some possible points of interest, it claims not to be conclusive, but to show the many ways in which *Die Frau von früher* can be interesting with respect to German theatre and culture alike.