

The World

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Rudolf Berger, director of the Volksoper, the respected Viennese opera house

'Sound of Music' Is Coming Home

The first full-scale theatrical production in Austria will try to win over citizens, many of whom believe the story hawks Alpine clichés.

By **SONYA YEE**
Times Staff Writer

VIENNA — It may have introduced the world to the land of crisp apple strudel and schnitzel with noodles, but "The Sound of Music" has never been one of Austria's favorite things.

Thanks to the musical by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein — especially the 1965 film version starring Julie Andrews — much of the world knows and loves the story of the singing Von Trapp family, who fled Austria after the Nazis took over in 1938.

Few in Austria, however, have even seen the film, which was not released in theaters here and wasn't shown on Austrian television until the mid-1990s.

That lack of exposure is due to end this month when the respected Viennese opera house, the Volksoper, premieres the musical. The new production will give Austrians a belated glimpse of the pop culture phenomenon that, as the Volksoper's website puts it, "created an image of Austria unknown in this country."

This will be the first full-scale theatrical production of "The Sound of Music" in Austria, although an avant-garde Viennese theater scored a hit some years back with an ironic take on the musical.

Rudolf Berger, director of the Volksoper, conceded that the production would have to overcome no small amount of native disdain.

"You always hear that it's such a kitsch image of Austria," he said. "To a certain extent there is a prejudice against the piece."

Although not many Austrians have seen "The Sound of Music," everyone has an opinion about it, Berger said. Many say it promotes an Alpine cliché of lonely yodeling goatherds and lederhosen.

As befits this city of high culture, the Volksoper is assuaging Austrian fears of rampant cheesiness by treating the musical chestnut with the seriousness it claims it deserves.

The opera house's promotional materials promise that the new production, in German with English supertitles, will "prove that the musical is also worth staging without the Alpine kitsch trimmings."

To that end the Volksoper has hired the French Canadian team of director Renaud Doucet and set and costume designer Andre Barbe, whose resumes are short on musicals and long on classical opera. Erich Kunzel, maestro of the Cincinnati Pops Orchestra, is conducting.

Doucet dismissed the notion that "The Sound of Music" wouldn't be "The Sound of Music" without the kitsch. He said the musical was "fantastically well written," with timeless and universal appeal.

"Is 'The Sound of Music' popular because it is kitsch? No, it's about the message, the music, the simplicity, the honesty," Doucet said.

Questions of taste aside, Austrians may have also been put off by the subject matter.

"The Sound of Music," however upbeat, touches on Austria's complicity with the Nazi regime, a past that the country is still coming to grips with.

Berger thinks that may account for the musical's relative obscurity here.



A FAMILIAR IMAGE: Sandra Pires, who will star as Maria von Trapp in the Volksoper production of "The Sound of Music," carries her guitar in Salzburg, where the Von Trapp family lived.



THE HILLS ARE ALIVE: Many in Austria have not seen the 1965 movie starring Julie Andrews, which was not released in theaters and wasn't shown on TV until the mid-1990s.

"It shows a lot of people who behaved badly in this country, and that did not help it to be popular," he said. "But hopefully that has changed."

Doucet believes that audiences will discover that "The Sound of Music" offers a surprisingly nuanced view of Austria's wartime history.

It depicts the gamut of Austrian reaction, from those who welcomed the Nazis with open arms to those willing to appease the powers that be, to the heroism of a "family that said no," Doucet said.

"'The Sound of Music' is about freedom and taking destiny into your own hands," he said. "That is why it is anti-kitsch

— because it's real, it's touching."

Austrian theatergoers appear willing to see what the fuss is about. Pre-sales for the musical, which opens Saturday and runs through June, have been strong; by the beginning of February about 18,000 tickets had been sold. "People are curious to be finally able to see the piece," Berger said.

The target audience is Austrian, but Berger hopes that tourists, particularly from the U.S. and Asia, where "The Sound of Music" enjoys cult status, will also jump at the chance to see the musical in-country, even if the songs have been translated into German.

"The Sound of Music" has

long been a tourism cash cow for Salzburg, the quaint western Austrian town that was home to the real-life Von Trapp family.

According to the Salzburg tourism board, 75% of American tourists going to Salzburg do so because of the movie, which was filmed on location in 1964. In fact, "The Sound of Music" was voted the greatest "travel-inspiring movie" in a recent poll by the magazine Budget Travel.

The settings for the film's classic scenes can be visited on one of Salzburg's many "Sound of Music" tours. Among them are the Mirabell Gardens ("Do-Remi") and the Nonnberg Abbey, where high-spirited novice nun Maria lived before finding love with the widowed Baron von Trapp and his seven children.

"The Sound of Music" is enormously important for Salzburg, as important as Mozart," said Maria Altendorfer of the city's tourism board.

Now tourists who haven't had their fill with the Original Sound of Music Tour, the Sound of Music by Hot-Air Balloon and the Sound of Music Dinner Show can add a Vienna stop to their itinerary.

Although the Volksoper production will accommodate Austrian sensitivities, Doucet said that "Sound of Music" lovers needn't fear that their beloved classic has been tampered with.

"They will get to see it with real Austrians," he said, "in a country where tradition means something."

The Volksoper may also stage "The Sound of Music" in the original English for the 2006 season, depending on the success of the upcoming run, Berger said.

Ruling Party in Brazil at a Crossroads

Critics say the grouping has dropped its core principles. Top officials insist it is evolving.

By **HENRY CHU**
Times Staff Writer

SAO PAULO, Brazil — If 25 sounds young for a midlife crisis, consider what the Workers' Party has been through in its quarter-century of existence.

After its humble birth among disgruntled metalworkers, the party weathered abuse from a right-wing dictatorship, built a committed following and survived a bout of adolescent blues. It stumbled badly in its first outings at the polls, shed some of its leftist dogma and, after three successive defeats, succeeded in getting Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva elected as Brazil's first working-class president in 2002.

Now the party, or PT, is staggering under the weight of its history as it tries to decide what it stands for. A significant number of dissidents question whether the party has lost its leftist identity and no longer shines as a beacon of social justice in a country marked by a large gap between rich and poor.

Lula, a former lathe operator, was elected partly on promises that he would tackle the glaring inequities in income, education and health. But few, if any, of those pledges have been met. Instead, his administration has concentrated on promoting economic growth following the Wall Street-ordered prescriptions of his center-right predecessor, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, a course that smacks of betrayal to many party faithful.

"Certainly the image [existed] that, 'Well, the PT's going to get there and finally the social question is going to be addressed.' And that's precisely the area that's been weakest," said Margaret Keck, a professor at Johns Hopkins University and author of a book about the PT.

"People expected them to go for direct social programs to a much greater extent than they have," Keck said. "And nobody expected this degree of fiscal conservatism."

More than 100 PT members announced late last month that they were quitting the party and accused it of abandoning its core principles. The defectors included a prominent economist whose father was one of the PT's founders in 1980. Party officials dismiss the impact of the members' departure.

The leadership has expelled left-wing legislators who refused to toe the party line, sparking fears among members that the internal democracy and diversity that have long been among the PT's hallmarks were in peril.

The officials acknowledge that the party has changed, but through a gradual evolution that recognized the need to move toward the center to remain electable. Although the party still espouses socialism, its approach differs from the days when the PT openly pushed for "a rupture" with capitalism.

"These two years we've demonstrated our capacity to govern," said Gleber Naine, PT organization secretary. "And the changes may not be as far-reaching as we want them to be, but they're what's been possible."

Party leaders acknowledge that the grievances of the rank-and-file members are real. They have begun talking about the need to rethink and perhaps return to the party's roots, especially after some tough losses in municipal elections last October, including the mayoralty of Porto Alegre, which the PT had ruled for 16 years.

"We are going to reevaluate our whole path, discuss the direction of the left and the direction that we want," PT Secretary-General Silvio Pereira told the daily O Estado de Sao Paulo.

To that end, the official celebrations of the party's 25th anniversary, which was Feb. 10, are to include seminars on the role of the left and the history of the PT.

Some members doubt whether that will slow the party's slide to the center or whether the discussions will lead to a rhetorical fig leaf that will allow Lula to stick to his agenda and call it true to historic PT values.

That rhetoric could prove helpful in a year when his government is expected to press for changes in tax and labor codes that could deepen the feeling among workers of being neglected by the party they considered their standard-bearer.

"There is concern they're losing bases within the unions, that they're losing touch with social movements, that they're not seen as the party of the left," said Christopher Garman, a political analyst with the Tendencias consultancy. "So these seminars are to try to reposition the PT as the party of the left and to cast the agenda of reforms of this government as progressive."

To recover lost ground with unionists, Lula has promised an increase in the minimum wage, from about \$100 per month to \$115. He and his advisors are also keen to attend to Brazil's middle class, which includes many industrial workers and has historically accounted for a solid chunk of PT support. Some party officials blame their municipal election losses on middle-class anger over recent pension reforms.

Lula had won the presidency by broadening his appeal beyond urban workers and the middle class to earn the support of the rural poor and a sliver of Brazil's elite. He and his advisors have their eyes trained on reelection next year, eager that he not become a one-term anomaly.

Forced to govern through a coalition, Lula has had to keep competing interests in Congress happy in order to push through even a limited agenda. That pragmatism, however, has created a fuzzy picture of what the PT now stands for.

It was the former union leader's own party that dealt him his largest setback in Congress, a defeat last week that signaled the disarray plaguing the PT.

A party backbencher unhappy with Lula's handpicked choice for president of Congress decided to mount his own bid, and was supported by other junior PT representatives fed up with what they felt was high-handed treatment by the party leadership. Although the maverick candidate lost, he siphoned enough votes to force Lula's man into a second round with another challenger, who won.

The loss will further compromise and complicate Lula's ability to pass the reforms he is expected to promote this year. Party leaders have been meeting to analyze what went wrong.

Keck, the professor, said that much of what bedevils the PT is the growing pains common to opposition movements that get into government.

"When you're still in the opposition, you don't have to face up to all the difficulties and contradictions that coalition government entails," she said. "A lot of stuff that they're in crisis about is not at all new. It's happened to every socialist or social democratic party when it finds itself in power."

The PT has had to overhaul itself at various points and has weathered those conflicts, just as analysts expect it to pull through this one.



POINT MAN: Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, center, meets with Workers' Party mayors in Brasilia in 2003.

U.S.-Japan Statement Angers China

From Times Wire Services

BEIJING — China issued a stiff protest Sunday about military cooperation between the United States and Japan, attacking a recent joint statement on Taiwan as an unwelcome intrusion into Beijing's affairs.

The complaint, issued by the Foreign Ministry, reflected deep concern over Japan's increasing security cooperation with the U.S. in East Asia.

Until now, Japan has left it to the U.S. to deal with China's threats to use force against Taiwan, which Beijing views as a renegade province.

The U.S. has indicated that it would intervene if China were to try to take Taiwan by force, while a cautious Japan traditionally

has sought to avoid involvement.

The revised U.S.-Japanese strategic understanding, issued Saturday after a meeting of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld with their Japanese counterparts, for the first time included security in the area around Taiwan as a "common strategic objective." This was described by U.S. officials as a new element in a close military association that dates from the aftermath of World War II.

In addition, the U.S.-Japanese statement drew attention to China's rapid military modernization program, calling it a matter of concern, and urged Beijing to be more transparent in its military planning and

weapons procurement.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Kong Quan said Sunday that "the statement included the Taiwan issue, which relates to China's sovereignty, territorial integrity and national security. The Chinese government and people strongly oppose this statement."

The focus on China's military improvements also drew sharp criticism from Beijing. China's foreign and defense policies are aimed at increasing security and fostering economic development in the region, Kong said.

"Any indiscreet remarks or criticisms on the construction of China's defenses, which aim to maintain security and territorial integrity, are untenable," he said.