
Frankfurter Rundschau

Triumphant Restart After Two Hard Years

The English Theatre reopened its old premises on Sunday—without long speeches, but with many tears of joy.- Andreas Hartmann

Suddenly, everything moved very fast after all: late on Friday morning, director Ewan Jones learned that performances at the English Theatre (ETF) would be allowed again on Sunday—back in its traditional venue in the base of Frankfurt's Gallileo Tower. Jones reports this on Sunday evening, still beaming with happiness after a triumphant restart marked by few speeches and an enthusiastic audience.

The show on February 1 had long been sold out. Many people had bought tickets as early as the previous year; some kept trying again and again, even though all performances planned for November, December, and January had been canceled. Artistic director Daniel Nicolai is the only speaker on Sunday. The list of thank-yous is long, but above all, he says—visibly relieved—the theatre owes its extraordinarily loyal audience a great deal.

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Frankfurt's head of cultural affairs, Ina Hartwig (SPD), who also received Nicolai's heartfelt thanks, sent a message of greeting: “It took a long time and cost all of us a lot of nerves. This period of uncertainty is now hopefully over. Much joy with the restart, dear ETF!” The City of Frankfurt is the main tenant of the theatre spaces; on February 1, 2024—exactly two years ago—the city council approved the lease agreement. “For us, a circle is closing today,” says ETF press spokesperson Andrea Leonhardt; it goes without saying that her joy is equally evident.

After two years and two weeks, the musical *Something Rotten!*—which had been abruptly canceled in January 2024 due to a dispute with the property owner, Singapore-based Capitaland—has returned. This comes after numerous postponements, an odyssey through several alternative venues, an existentially threatening conflict with a hard-to-reach investor from the Far East, and an unprecedented wave of solidarity from politicians and audiences alike for the largest English-language theatre on the continent.

That the theatre can improvise masterfully became apparent at the revival—both in what could be seen and what could not. “One of our lead actors didn't want to come back after the long enforced break,” Nicolai reports. “We had to find a replacement at very short notice.” Actor Charlie Smart from London had just two weeks to learn the demanding role and only arrived in Frankfurt on Friday (!).

He had just two rehearsals with the ensemble before Sunday evening. This earns great admiration from director Jones, and musical director Mal Hall is also full of praise for the young talent after the premiere. From his colleagues on stage—who had already been ready since the last rehearsals in November—there is special applause on Sunday for this outstanding performance. The evening

shows: this is theatre at the highest level; it could just as well run in London's West End or on Broadway (or Off-Broadway—it's quite cheeky and anarchic, after all).

Something Rotten! had been staged at the ETF before, but Jones and Hall have changed quite a bit—"we spiced it up," Jones says with a wink. Visually, everything remains the same, but during the performance it becomes clear that the theatre has invested 300,000 euros in sound and 200,000 euros in new, energy-efficient LED lighting. The sound is crystal clear. "I always thought it was my English that kept me from catching everything," says one delighted audience member. "But now I understand the lyrics perfectly."

Eight of the fourteen actors are new, the piece has even more bite, and in that sense it is almost a second premiere. "You rarely get an opportunity like this—it's extremely rare to be able to change a production again," says Jones. Who could have planned that two years ago?

Yes, they can improvise here. Even when the women's restrooms are flooded on Sunday, Nicolai simply grabs a mop and bucket himself. The bar doesn't have much to offer yet? No drama there either. "Nobody delivers on such short notice," says bartender Igor Trkulja, who normally works in ETF marketing. "We just need a bit more logistics. But our audience is so wonderful—some people had to rebook five times and still didn't lose their patience." People are simply happy that the theatre is back—that's something you hear again and again this evening. Mal Hall, conducting behind the scenes, says he had to cry three times during the performance. They were tears of joy.

And the audience members? Sebastian Barwinek, a devoted ETF-goer and English teacher from Hanau dressed appropriately for the occasion, had wanted to attend a performance with his class two years ago—canceled. Great disappointment. This time, he gave his partner Irina Ceapraz tickets to the musical for Christmas, rebooked once—and bingo!—got lucky.

In the coming weeks, everyday life is supposed to return to the Gallileo Tower (though theatre life is anything but routine—improvisation is a way of life here). After *Something Rotten!* comes *Churchill in Moscow*, and then Ewan Jones returns once again with *Dracula – A Comedy of Terrors*. "I'm looking forward to finally getting to know Frankfurt in the summer," he says.