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Ressort: Kunst, Kultur und Musik

Sharp, Intelligent, and Uncomfortably Timely Evening

Burgtheater, 10.05.2026 [ENA]

Ayad Akhtar's *Der Fall McNeal* is a remarkably current piece of theatre, and in Vienna it arrives with the kind of seriousness and intellectual precision that makes the stage feel urgently alive. Its sharp relevance and uncompromising dramatic force give the evening an unsettling brilliance that lingers long after the final scene, inviting reflection on authorship, ambition, and the moral cost of creative success.

The play confronts authorship, fraud, betrayal, family exploitation, and artificial intelligence, but it does so through dramatic form rather than abstract debate, which gives the evening a lively theatrical pulse. In the Burgtheater's hands, the work becomes a compelling study of moral erosion wrapped in elegant stagecraft, and it unfolds with unsettling clarity and finesse.

At the centre is Jacob McNeal, a celebrated writer whose success is inseparable from deception and emotional predation. The play's force lies in the way it exposes both the glamour and the rot of literary prestige, and the Burgtheater production leans into that tension with confidence. The result is not a lecture about AI or authorship, but a vivid human drama about vanity, guilt, and the cost of turning other people's lives into material. That makes the evening feel immediate, provocative, and theatrically fruitful.

One of the production's greatest strengths is its concentration. With a running time of just over two hours and no interval, the play moves with a disciplined momentum that suits its subject perfectly. The structure allows the audience to follow McNeal's collapse without distraction, and the Burgtheater uses that pressure to excellent effect. The pace gives the evening a charged, almost forensic quality, as each scene strips away another layer of self-justification.

The role of McNeal is especially well served by the play's emphasis on contradiction. He is not written as a simple villain, but as a man whose intelligence, charisma, and self-delusion are inseparable. That complexity is exactly what makes the evening so satisfying. The Burgtheater production understands that the most interesting theatrical figures are often the least comfortable ones, and it presents McNeal as both repellent and magnetic. This duality gives the audience something substantial to watch: not a moral cartoon, but a richly unstable protagonist whose collapse feels psychologically credible.

Thematically, the play is impressive in the way it binds together several major concerns of contemporary culture. It asks what authorship means in an age of AI, how much art depends on theft, and whether creative

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genius can ever be separated from exploitation. These are not easy subjects, yet the play handles them with unusual dramatic clarity. The Burgtheater's production gives them a serious stage life, which is precisely what such material needs. Rather than flattening the questions into slogans, it allows them to reverberate through character and action.

The visual language of the production also seems well suited to the piece's concerns. Reviews of the original Burgtheater staging note the use of video and digital imagery, which reinforces the play's interest in mediation, identity, and constructed truth. In a work about authorship and artificial intelligence, such devices can be more than decorative: they can become part of the argument. The production therefore has the opportunity to turn the stage into a space where technology and psychology collide in compelling ways.

What makes *Der Fall McNeal* particularly effective at the Burgtheater is its cultural relevance. Vienna audiences are seeing a play that speaks directly to the present moment: literary ethics, gendered power, the manipulation of personal narratives, and the destabilizing influence of generative technologies. This gives the evening a sharp edge, but also a sense of importance. The theatre is not simply entertaining its public; it is thinking with it.

At the same time, the piece remains unmistakably theatrical. Its pleasures are not only intellectual but dramatic: the pleasure of watching a character unravel, the pleasure of well-shaped dialogue, and the pleasure of seeing an actor inhabit a difficult role with authority. That combination of ideas and performance is what the Burgtheater does best. It allows the audience to enjoy the artistry of the evening even while confronting the ugly truths at its core.

In the end, *Der Fall McNeal* is strong because it trusts theatre to do what theatre does best: reveal character through tension, expose hypocrisy through speech, and turn contemporary anxieties into living drama. The Burgtheater's presentation appears to embrace that task with intelligence and style. The evening offers a powerful blend of relevance, structure, and psychological bite, making it an especially rewarding event for anyone interested in serious modern theatre.

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Redaktion und Verantwortlichkeit:

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