

## **Just How Quirky can the 8th District Get?**

**By Ana Tajder**

*Vienna Review book review editor Ana Tajder's first novel From Barbie to Vibrator is a female coming-of-age story set in Vienna's 8<sup>th</sup> district. Already published in her home country of Croatia, the book will be published this month in German by Czernin Verlag.*

Laudonplace is what happens when you combine Laudongasse and Merlose Place. It is a modern apartment building in the middle of Vienna's 8<sup>th</sup> district, full of young, single, but most of all, crazy people. Among those 90 apartments, a bunch of gay men and two straight women have formed a strong friendship, which has in time turned into something of a family.

We have all lived in this house for the past twelve years. Some were here from the beginning and left, like Minka; some have come later and left, like Sigi and Christian and then there are some who are still here, like Marcus, Gunther, Ricco, Erich (the last two are even straight) and I. Every now and then, we try to recruit new people, especially the handsome young men who happen to move in, but somehow, it doesn't work. Did we turn too weird? I don't know, but not being able to get new members is sad - it means that in time, Laudonplace is doomed. But we're not that far yet.

Five years ago, as I started writing down the Laudonplace stories, I had no intention of writing a book. It was more an act of celebration of the extravaganza that our lives were. My life seemed perfect: I had a great career in an international corporation, I was travelling (and partying) around the world, shopping with girl friends, sleeping with male models. Not only I, but all of the Laudonplace has been spellbound by the magic of what we were going through. This was kind of a viscous circle – the more crazy things got, the more mesmerized we were, and the more ready to make crazy things happen. Life was a drug and we loved tripping on it.

It took me some time and many new pages to realise what I had actually been doing: it was a portrait of my generation and a shedding of the skin of my own youth. Both felt equally important.

As I started writing, the stories felt great. But soon I began to realise that I was simply confused. And so was my whole generation. This incredible spectrum of possibilities, rights, possessions, places, people we could chose from was an incredible luxury. It was also a burden.

“It must be difficult and painful being a woman in the 21<sup>st</sup> century,” Frédéric Beigbeder commented after he read my book. Yes it is, because since now you can have it all, you must find out what it is that you really want. This is often a very painful process.

Ever since I got my first job at 22 and my first apartment (yes, in Laudonplace), all I have been doing was trying to find out what I really wanted. Ten years later, my trial period was over. I packed my journey into a book and started a new life. A life more quiet, more simple, but also more satisfying, and most of all – more creative. While I used to be part of “the game” and always out on the field, now I am spending most of my time at my desk, watching the crows building their nests and analysing “the game” in articles, in my next book and in my PhD.

I have changed, and so has Laudonplace.

A few days ago, Marcus' friend mistakenly called us The Laudon Palais. We actually liked the new name – it perfectly fits the way Laudonplace has changed.

When telling strangers about Laudonplace and the good old times, Patrick, the French “baroness” from the 7<sup>th</sup> floor, always explains that I used to be a sex bomb and that now, I am just plain boring. The same goes for him: While I used to be scared to enter his apartment for the sheer possibility that all that mixed-up testosterone in the air could get me pregnant, now he is in a serious relationship with a person most like himself. “Baby”, his boyfriend, is

Patrick's clone both in looks and character, only 23 years younger. That's where his nickname comes from.

The parties we used to have in Gunther's place (4<sup>th</sup> floor) with all those very stylish members of Vienna's society, are also no more. Gunther though is still happily lost in his tripping, which is cool for a man in his mid sixties. Last Saturday around noon, he was sitting in Marcus' convertible, driving along the Mariahilferstrasse, top down, music playing and all. At one point, Gunther turned to Marcus: "We have to get off at the next stop," he insisted. We're still trying to figure out where he thought he was. And sometimes I wonder if I should start smoking the same stuff. God only knows where I would end up.

Since I am not having sex with supermodels anymore (to my neighbours' great disappointment) the highlight of Laudonplace is when Minka (6<sup>th</sup> floor) comes back from Bosnia with her husband and their six-month-old baby. We were all occupied for months, even years, with the question of whether she should get married and move back home. She did both, plus had a baby, and now we all know that the decision was right. Because even though she is now living in a small, provincial Bosnian town, she has something we don't – her own family. The boys never will, and I badly want to – and Minka's baby is always a sweet, but painful, reminder.

The boys' reactions to our first Laudonplace baby are completely opposite. Gunther just couldn't care less while Partick is still angry for having lost Minka, his best friend. He completely ignores the baby. Marcus, on the other hand, is crazy about it. He plays with it, holding it, feeding and goo-gooing it for hours at a time. And when the Bosnian holy family goes to sleep, he sits on my couch with a glass of wine in his hand, and tells me about the real curse of being gay: Knowing you will never have a child of your own. And he desperately wants one. So we agreed: I would have his baby if I were still single when my time ran out.

Right now my Marcus, the most beautiful man in the world, is in a relationship with a very nerdy and very ambitious young lawyer who hates our guts and claims we are all lunatics. Well, maybe we are. But who else can say they have the luxury of living in a house with a bunch of lunatics who adore them and are always there when you need them (and sometimes when you don't)? The lawyer has turned Marcus into a housewife; he shops for food and then cooks dinner at the Husband's place. Which wouldn't be at all that bad if he didn't return home after dinner, TV and sex. The Husband claims Marcus is snoring and makes him sleep on the couch. And then kicks him out in the morning when he goes to work. So Marcus prefers to sleep at his place. Which is great because we can have a glass of wine on his terrace before going to bed.

The biggest change in Laudonplace is that now, we have a brothel on the top floor. We are all extremely offended by this. The fun sex this house used to be filled with has now been replaced by the professional type. This is very un-charming. Every time Marcus meets a prostitute or an obvious client in the elevator, he sends us angry SMSs about this horrible encounter. We joke and say that if we meet a very handsome one, we will steal him away. Hasn't happened yet. Unfortunately.

Laudonplace is going through the kind of change our society goes through regularly, like the change from the 80's to the 90's: the shimmer of gold, big hair, lots of coke, and funky music got overthrown by 90's minimalism, yoga, macrobiotics and Massive Attack. Or what we are experiencing now with the economic crisis: Billions pouring from hedge funds are being replaced by millions of lost jobs. Maybe soon we'll all have to start selling ourselves.

Maybe one day, Marcus and I really will have a baby and create a Laudonplace family. Maybe I will finally meet the man of my dreams and move out. Maybe Minka will come back. Maybe the boys will live here for ever. Maybe they won't.

Life is about the flow.

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