

# Sex! Death! Religion! The Wild Vienna of MEASURE FOR MEASURE

By Scott Horstein

***My superstition I'll yield never  
To the enlightened and clever  
Nowadays it's a relief  
To have any kind of belief***

— Johann Nestroy,  
Viennese playwright

*Measure for Measure* (1604), the last comedy of William Shakespeare, gives us a great city torn by unconscious desires. In the Austrian capital of Vienna, seat of the Holy Roman Empire, religion and the state dictate morality. But in the streets, rich and poor alike maintain a roaring sex trade. And in the prisons, wardens and executioners create a law unto themselves. Director Paul Mullins has updated the 1604 Vienna of Shakespeare's day to the freewheeling Vienna at the turn of the twentieth century, but the situation remains the same: a Catholic city seething with passions and contradictions.

*Fundamentally this is a play about absolutes. Although Angelo's absolute of restraint, Isabella's absolute of chastity and the Duke's absolute of authority are supported by both religious and secular law, in practice these uncompromising ideals prove untenable and suspect.*

—Anne Barton

Vienna at the turn of the twentieth century fostered a cultural, intellectual, and economic explosion such as Western society has rarely seen. One of the most profound figures to emerge was Doctor Sigmund Freud, one of the founders of modern psychology. In his study *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud theorized that two great psychological forces determined the course of civilizations: *eros*, the drive to create and make love, and its adversary *thanatos*, the drive to create death. Freud saw human civilization as a titanic, unending conflict between our two deepest desires, and wrote about civilization based upon the repression and contradictions he saw in the Vienna of his time. William Shakespeare wrote *Measure for Measure* three hundred years before Freud, but Freud's Vienna perfectly suits Shakespeare's problem comedy about sexual repression, severe crackdown, and wavering faith.

Vienna was the capital of the great Holy Roman Empire which dominated Central and Eastern Europe for centuries. So in our Vienna tonight you will see statesmen and aristocrats obsessed with Christian doctrine, as well as devout nuns and friars, the political and moral leaders of a great Christian state.

ISABELLA FROM MEASURE FOR MEASURE; COSTUME SKETCH BY ROBERT MORGAN.



TOM HAMMOND AS DUKE VINCENTIO AND STEPHANIE FIEGER AS ISABELLA;  
PHOTO BY CRAIG SCHWARTZ.

But thriving under the surface of the Holy Roman Empire you'll also see the agents of *eros* in Vienna's unholy sex trade. In turn-of-the-century Vienna, the authorities enforced vice laws in haphazard but cruel fashion. The Viennese government considered prostitution legitimate and legal. The catch was that any woman who had sex out of wedlock was officially considered a prostitute and was required to register as a sex worker and serve a week-long prison sentence. The situation resembled Shakespeare's Vienna under the rule of Duke Vincentio, with laws enforced inconsistently, as well as under the subsequent rule of Angelo, with his zealous crackdown on all unmarried sex.

Further under the surface of the Holy Roman Empire, in the prisons, you'll see the agents of *thanatos*: the wardens and the executioners lurking with their axes. We would expect the Viennese to treat death with reverence or with fear, as Claudio does. Yet, as Freud revealed in his work, our fear of death lives side by side with our powerful attraction to it. Shakespeare illustrates this most clearly in the character of Pompey, who overcomes his fear of the executioner to become one himself, performing his work with relish.

In *Measure for Measure*, you'll see the great failures and triumphs of moral crusaders; the wild joys and dangerous predations of procurers and madams; and the fell operations of executioners. You'll see that Freud was right: *eros* and *thanatos* are in everyone. When Claudio asks his sister Isabella to save his life by sleeping with Angelo, or when the Duke deploys Marianna to take Isabella's place, who is really the pimp? When Isabella tells her brother Claudio she'd rather see him die than succumb to Angelo's lust, is she the executioner? In such a mixed-up society, where the balance between *eros* and *thanatos* changes every time a new character comes on stage, what does it mean to have faith in a higher power, or even your fellow citizen? This is the heart of Freud's dichotomy, and of Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*.

*Shakespeare is throughout taking the measure of justice and mercy, reason and appetite, the natural world and the divine. Essentially all of the major protagonists are journeying toward self-knowledge.*

— Urjo Kareda