

Received: 18 November 2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33182/agon.v19i1.3611>

## Theater Review

### Nietzsche: A New Musical

Performed at A.R.T./New York Mezzanine Theatre, October 10-12, 2025

Book, music & lyrics by Kimerer LaMothe, music & orchestration by Geoffrey Gee, directed by Liz Bealko and music directed by Erin Kennedy

Yunus Tuncel<sup>1</sup> and Michael Steinmann<sup>2</sup>

An impressive staging of the life of Friedrich Nietzsche, almost his entire life compressed into two hours and twenty minutes of performance. No doubt, there are always challenges for any such production. From what parts of the life of this thinker one should take to make an interesting performance must have been on the minds of the creators of this project. This challenge notwithstanding, *Nietzsche: A New Musical* brought to stage many of the key figures who played an important role in the life of this philosopher whose works influenced thinkers, writers, and artists as various as Adorno, Heidegger, Deleuze, Foucault, Thomas Mann, Max Ernst, Richard Strauss, even Jack Kerouac and Jim Morrison – and the list goes on. The musical also showed his relationships and conflicts with these key figures from his life. Like Greek tragedies in art and spirit, the musical stages the main conflicts of the protagonist and his eventual fall – in Nietzsche's case, into madness.

Fritz, as the family calls him, loses his father when he is 4 years old and is left with his mother, Franziska, and sister, Elisabeth, as the only remaining members of his immediate family. We do not see, in this show, all the aunts and the grandmother, on his father's side, who lived with them for a while. As the young Fritz grows up in Naumburg, attends the gymnasium at Schulforta and becomes enthused with the works and culture of ancient Greece, he starts losing his Lutheran faith and clashes with his mother and sister. Franziska, coming from a pious family and being the widow of a Lutheran minister, has a hard time accepting her son's rebellion. The musical highlights this tension when Fritz refuses to attend the Easter mass, while capturing the complexity of their relationship. The various conflicts of this trio will continue for much of Nietzsche's life.

Another relationship with potential for conflict from the beginning was between Wagner and Nietzsche. The young Nietzsche had met Wagner in Leipzig when he was a student at the university there; this encounter, due to time constraints, was not shown in this musical. However, Wagner was plentifully present in the show with his big ego and his manipulation of Nietzsche directly and indirectly through Cosima, with whom Nietzsche

<sup>1</sup> Yunus Tuncel, The New School, New York, New York, USA. E-mail: tuncely@newschool.edu Michael Steinmann, Stevens Institute of Technology, Hoboken, New Jersey, USA. E-mail: msteinma@stevens.edu

<sup>2</sup> Yunus Tuncel, The New School, New York, New York, USA. E-mail: tuncely@newschool.edu Michael Steinmann, Stevens Institute of Technology, Hoboken, New Jersey, USA. E-mail: msteinma@stevens.edu

This is an open access article licensed under [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/4.0/), which permits use, distribution, provided the original work is properly cited and is not used for commercial purposes.

© 2025 The Author. **The Agonist** is published by Transnational Press London.



was infatuated. Nietzsche's initial submission to the master and later departure from him and the Wagnerian project were portrayed very well, while the spectators were not spared the multi-faceted life of the artist of the total artwork. While the Wagner-Nietzsche encounter remains one of the most interesting cross-disciplinary encounters of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the musical could only bring to life some of its aspects, including Nietzsche's distance from and later criticism of nationalistic and anti-Semitic trends in Wagner.

Representing Wagner on stage is no easy task. How should he be played, as a genius or an inspired, historically significant composer? The musical, instead, chooses caricature, which is an excellent choice. No attempt is made to represent the real Wagner; instead, we see him through Nietzsche's eyes, especially the critical, bitter eyes of his late years where he described him as an actor, a poser. The Wagner in the musical is an ambitious, arrogant type, bathing in his social success and looking down on the poor professor from Basel. One gets a sense of how disappointed and lonely Nietzsche must have felt after their friendship ended.

Nietzsche's relation with his mother, Franziska, and sister, Elizabeth, starts going sour as Nietzsche loses faith and refuses to go to Church for mass in his late teens. Although Nietzsche never severs his ties to his Lutheran Naumburg family entirely, his relationship with them becomes more and more difficult. One other tense moment in this relationship is when Nietzsche meets Lou-Salome and tries to be intimate with her. This meeting becomes possible through Malwida von Meysenbug and Paul Réé; the musical stages these four characters very well and brings to life another important aspect of Nietzsche's life. Here one sees multiple conflicts; on the one hand, Nietzsche is pulled between his love for Lou and his filial connection to his mother and sister who are entirely opposed to his attraction to Lou, whom they find to be immoral and whose free spirit they can hardly tolerate. On the other hand, there are tensions within the trinity. Eventually, Lou and Paul would leave Nietzsche behind and move to Berlin, while their initial plan was to start a colony of free spirits in Paris.

Like Greek tragedies, the musical was a total artwork on a small scale as it brought poetry, song, dance and music together. Music and dance set the stage for each scene, as conflicts unfolded, and as one sees the rise and the fall of the tragic hero into madness and eventual death. This fall was later exacerbated by the role Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche played in her ownership of Nietzsche's intellectual estate, where, under her leadership, Nietzsche's manuscripts were falsified and later misappropriated by Nazi ideologues. It is an interesting twist of history to see this mixed, contradictory role Elisabeth played in preserving Nietzsche's legacy.

Purists may shake their heads and wonder about the very idea of a musical based on Nietzsche's life. That's how far it has come, one could think: instead of reading his philosophy, we encounter him on Broadway, or at least in a Broadway-style setting? However, the idea of a Nietzsche musical is less astonishing if one considers how much Nietzsche himself appreciated the light, ironic style of Offenbach's operas. His late fascination with Bizet's *Carmen* may also suggest that he might have appreciated moving beyond the style of dark, Teutonic drama in an attempt at staging his life.

Of course, Nietzsche is a victim of his own success, which has turned him into a meme ("God is dead") that can easily prevent readers from seeing the hyper-reflective,



hypothetical style of his thought. Is his life even remarkable enough to be put on stage? For sure, Nietzsche's mental breakdown has become an emblematic scene, symbolizing the collapse of a whole world of metaphysical meaning. Nietzsche embracing the horse in Turin encapsulates the specter of nihilism looming large over modern culture. But besides that, not much happened in his life: he had a few interesting friends, was often sick, and spent most of his time writing and thinking.

The musical thankfully avoids an overly tragic end and does not venture into the melodrama of nihilistic despair. Nietzsche eventually has his breakdown, of course, and the musical counts the years leading up to his mental demise on a calendar visible to the audience. But he collapses among family members and friends, which sets the tone for a very different picture of his life: instead of spending his days alone, lonely and increasingly taken by a bout of manic productivity, Nietzsche, or "Fritz," is first and foremost a human being. He is deeply involved in the life of his sister Elisabeth, as much as she is involved in his, and his unrequited love for Lou Salome is the single most relevant episode of his life. Or so the musical suggests by making these relationships a central element of the action.

Fritz, who is very convincingly played by Will Paddock, is an enthusiastic and occasionally exuberant young man who is at the same time conflicted and shy. He stays a young man somewhat his whole life, at least in his attitude toward relationships and professional accomplishment. The viewer is made to feel for him. As already said, the musical starts with the death of his father and his younger brother, which sets the tone for all action that follows. The musical could have easily started later in Nietzsche's life, for example, when he was a freshman at university immersing himself in Schopenhauer's romantic pessimism. But no, the life shown on stage starts with him being deeply affected by the illness and suffering that had come over his family, or better: it starts with him as a devoted family member who stays a devoted family member all his life, despite the troubles with his intrusive sister (or perhaps because of them).

The prominent role of the sister as well as Lou adds what could be called, slightly stereotypically, a female energy to the plot. At times, there is perhaps a little too much family drama, too much jealousy and competition between these two most crucial women in Nietzsche's life. But on the other hand, what all this family and romantic drama reveals is the depth of personal and emotional connection that made Nietzsche who he was.

Female energy is also present throughout the whole play with four dancers, who constantly enter and exit the scene, adding musicality and movement to the personal and intellectual disputes. One can see this as a nod to Nietzsche's own ideas of musical drama, articulated in his early work, *The Birth of the Tragedy*, where the non-verbal, bodily impact of music is thought to express much more adequately what words can only suggest. In popular culture, there is also often a certain heroism associated with Nietzsche, especially with the *Übermensch*, who is always, seemingly unavoidably, male. Contrary to it, the dancers represent ever-flowing emotions, a ground of existence deeper than rationality, which is much more in tune with Nietzsche's own view of human existence.

Many thanks to Kimerer LaMothe, Geoffrey Gee, Liz Bealko, Erin Kennedy and all the artists of the project for bringing Nietzsche to stage, not only as a thinker but also as a singer and a dancer. It would have been a good addition if Nietzsche were shown playing

the piano, as this was his lifelong passion, but this may have added a complication to the acting. We look forward to a bigger production where more stories from Nietzsche's life can be included with a bigger ensemble of musicians and a wider stage for dancers' broader and freer movements.

