

ROUTLEDGE REVIVALS

The First German Theatre

Schiller, Goethe, Kleist and
Büchner in Performance

Michael Patterson



The First German Theatre

First published in 1990. This book surveys the development of German theatre from a market sideshow into an important element of cultural life and political expression. It examines Schiller as 'theatre poet' at Mannheim, Goethe's work as director of the court theatre at Weimar, and then traces the rapid commercial decline that made it difficult for Kleist and impossible for Büchner to see their plays staged in their own lifetime. Four representative texts are analysed: Schiller's *The Robbers*, Goethe's *Iphigenia in Tauris*, Kleist's *The Prince of Homburg*, and Büchner's *Woyzeck*. This title will be of interest to students of theatre and German literature.

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To Jane

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PREFACE

When I studied German drama at university in the sixties, not once was I invited to consider any play as a text for performance. The works for the stage of Schiller, Goethe, Kleist and Büchner were discussed solely as literary texts without any acknowledgment that most of them had been written with a particular kind of theatre in mind and for a particular type of audience. I passed my examinations without the knowledge that Goethe had spent twenty-six years as Director of the Court Theatre at Weimar, producing plays and training actors, or that Schiller, after being writer in residence at the National Theatre in Mannheim, had worked in the theatre with Goethe in Weimar. More importantly, I read these plays from the great age of German drama without any sense of how they would work on stage before a living audience.

For a great age it undoubtedly was. Suffering from its political divisions and the unfortunate historical habit of serving as the battleground of Europe, Germany was very late in enjoying a flowering of its national theatre. England and Spain had already established a vigorous theatre tradition in the sixteenth century, and France followed in the seventeenth. But in Germany the eighteenth century began without any native theatrical tradition. There were wandering players performing coarse farces and crude enactments of historical events; on the other hand, there was the amateur theatre of the Jesuit schools, usually performed in Latin. That the century ended in Germany with some of the finest writing for the theatre in Europe, is remarkable.

Fortunately, the narrow vision of drama as literary text no longer prevails. In this respect, John Russell Brown's

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Shakespeare's Plays in Performance, treading in the footsteps of Granville Barker, has been decisively influential. For German theatre, apart from much excellent work in German, there has been the invaluable work of Marvin Carlson (*Goethe and the Weimar Theatre* and *The German Stage in the Nineteenth Century*) and of John Prudhoe (*The Theatre of Goethe and Schiller*). There has predictably been far less written about the theatrical aspects of Kleist and Büchner, since neither author had any success on the commercial stages of the early nineteenth century.

This book is the first attempt in the English language to trace the remarkable growth of German theatre from its unpromising situation in the first half of the eighteenth century to its recognized position in the cultural life of the nation in the 1800s. We shall see the efforts to found a German National Theatre, the newfound seriousness of the theatre work at Mannheim and Weimar, and the development in prestige of the acting profession. By 1800 German theatre was no longer a side-show at a fairground or a way of exercising pupils in rhetoric; it was a major cultural force in the nation, a forum for political debate, and a rallying-point for those speaking the same tongue to join in nationhood.

This is the story of the first *German* theatre.

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German theatre in the eighteenth century

The miserable state of German theatre until the final third of the eighteenth century was the result of several factors. Since Germany was divided into 360 states, each with its own laws, currency, measurements and its almost invariably despotic regime, there was no Paris or London to provide a cultural capital for the German-speaking peoples, nor any substantial cultured bourgeoisie to provide a dependable theatre audience. Even at the courts where cultured entertainment was promoted, taste and manners were copied from the French and Italians. This showed itself above all in the low regard in which the German language was held: university lectures were given in Latin, Germany's leading philosopher, Leibniz, wrote all his later works in French, and even the national hero Frederick the Great considered German as suitable only for speaking to one's horse.

While the German courts could enjoy quite sophisticated musical entertainment, the scope for plays, especially in German, was severely limited. This was reflected in the buildings available for performance. By the mid-eighteenth century many courts boasted magnificent well-equipped opera houses, in which Italian operas were performed for the courtiers (on the whole, bourgeois audiences were excluded – a source of grievance, since it was they who paid the taxes to finance these lavish spectacles). On the other hand, plays had to be performed in makeshift theatres, often no more than a shed or the back-room of a tavern. If a luxury like heating was available, this was usually proudly announced on the playbill as a special attraction.

Because of the lack of a regular theatre-going public, it was

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not possible to perform in one venue for any length of time, and so most theatre companies in the eighteenth century consisted of travelling players, who were treated by the authorities in the same way as jugglers, mountebanks, beggars and other vagrants. Acting troupes were also constantly under attack from the clergy – hardly surprising when in a Catholic city like Vienna the Papal Index itself was banned, since the mere titles of censored books might prove too salacious. On the other hand, Puritan elements condemned the theatre for its sacrilegious representations, arguing, for example that to imitate thunder was to challenge God's power. One piece, which was eventually banned by the church and is here described by the actor Ekhof, was typical of theatrical performance in the early eighteenth century:¹

Troupes of travelling players, who speed through the whole of Germany from one fair to another, amuse the mob with common farces. . . . One comedy, performed everywhere with the greatest frequency was called *Adam and Eve or the Fall of the First Beings*. It has not yet been completely banned, and I recall seeing it performed in Strasbourg. Eve was a fat woman whose body was covered in canvas painted in unconvincing flesh-colours and who had a little belt of fig-leaves stuck to her skin. Poor Adam looked just as ridiculous, but God the Father wore an old dressing gown and had a huge wig and a long white beard. The devils were played by clowns. . . . Otherwise everything was hideous: a poor wooden booth served as a theatre; the decorations were pathetic; the actors, clothed in rags and second-hand wigs looked like coachmen disguised as heroes; in a word, the comedy was a success only with the rabble.

The poor theatre facilities and the need to travel in search of an audience meant that scenery had to be very rudimentary and adaptable to different spaces. Indeed, most plays performed had a single setting, thus supporting out of economic necessity rather than from aesthetic conviction one of the central tenets of French neo-classicism, the Unity of Place. In the case of plays requiring a change of set, this was usually effected by the use of a mid-curtain, often crudely painted, before which a scene could be played while a new backdrop

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and possibly furniture were set up behind. In this way it was possible, for example, to move from an interior to a woodland scene and on to a new interior with only very brief breaks in the performance.

This fluency of performance remained a characteristic of German theatre throughout the century, typified by the insistence of Iffland, later to become Germany's major theatre director, that his actors should be allowed no more than five minutes for costume changes. This practice was later to be justified by the high-flown term *liaison des scènes*,² and would lead to the curiously 'Brechtian' device of changing sets in full view of the audience, sometimes even while actors continued to play the scene in the foreground. No doubt the need to play scenes as continuously as possible was for the wandering players a question of holding the attention of the spectators, especially where other attractions might draw them away from the play if intervals lasted for more than a few minutes. However, it also points to a certain level of theatrical sophistication in audiences of the day, in that they were prepared to disregard the comings and goings of stage-hands just as a Japanese audience will discount the presence of the black-robed assistants in Noh theatre.

Strangely though, given the audience's willingness to create settings in their imagination, there seems to have been no attempt to return to the use of the bare stage of the Elizabethans. The short-lived but influential Johann Elias Schlegel (1718–1749) had argued that there was no point in attempting to create realistic scenery on stage, since it was impossible to construct real houses – just as it was pointless to seek realism in dialogue when one could not reproduce the authentic speech of servants. This approach could theoretically have led to considering the abandonment of scenery altogether, but this development was to await Tieck in the nineteenth century. Perhaps the tawdry surroundings in which most plays had to be performed made audiences demand some token décor, and, of course, a visual signifier of the place of action was usually necessary, since few plays contained, as Shakespeare's do, indications of setting in the dialogue. Thus, even among the poorly equipped migrant troupes a backdrop was *de rigueur*. If it was the backdrop of an interior, furniture would be painted on to it, unless the furniture had to fulfil a

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function in the scene. Exterior scenes were hardly differentiated; even for permanent theatres later in the century Stieglitz, a writer on theatre architecture, recommended that a woodland setting could double as a garden.³ Whatever refinements were later introduced in terms of wing flats and perspective scenery, the basic approach was to remain unchanged from the days of the wandering players: a perfunctory set which could lay no claim to realism, a curious conjunction of two-dimensional painting and three-dimensional objects and actors.

While buildings and scenery left much to be desired, the wandering troupes paid considerably more attention to the quality of their wardrobe. Costumes are more easily transported and maintained than scenery, and the actor's vanity makes the question of costume a matter of far greater significance than what he or she acts in front of. Statistics are not available for the early 1700s, but by 1790 Schröder's wardrobe cost over 60,000 Marks, whereas he spent only 20,000 on sets and music, and in 1811 his expenditure on costumes rose to 22,598 Marks, while that on sets stood at 3,020 Marks. The standard costume for all plays for at least the first half of the century was based on the court dress of Versailles: heavily embroidered rococo dresses, high wigs and hats for women, and knee breeches, silk jackets and wigs for men. Again, while some gesture was later made towards authenticity, the practice of performing in costumes that hardly differentiated between Ancient Romans and eighteenth-century courtiers called on considerable imaginative participation by the audience.

The most important development in theatre technique that accompanied the move into purpose-built theatres later in the century was therefore not so much in the externals of set or costume but in acting style. Since the wandering players had to command the attention of frequently rowdy audiences, performances were unsubtle, loud and declamatory, and frequently resorted to improvisation to cover lapses of memory or to evoke an easy response from the playgoers. However elevated the theme of the play, injections of comedy were essential to keep the spectators happy, and virtually every production had to be enlivened with the presence of the stock clown, the Hanswurst.

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Indeed, one of the most significant moments in the history of the German theatre was the symbolic banning of the Hanswurst from the stage by Karoline Neuber's troupe in Leipzig in October 1737. In fact, the Hanswurst figure was far too robust an individual to accept banishment, and of course he survived for many decades after.

One reason for the longevity of the Hanswurst and for associated knockabout comedy was the special financial rewards actors were given for slapstick. Thus in Vienna there was a table of approved remuneration as follows:

For each flying through the air	1 fl.
For each jump into water	1 fl.
For each jump over a wall or from a rock	1 fl.
For each disguise	1 fl.
For receiving blows	34 kr.
For receiving a box on the ear	34 kr.
For receiving a kick of the foot	34 kr.
For each bruise	34 kr.
For having water poured over you	34 kr.
For each fencer in a duel	34 kr. ⁴

Nevertheless, Karoline Neuber's banishment of the Hanswurst was one of the many important attempts to raise German theatre from a crude form of popular entertainment to the level of an acknowledged art-form. If we may speak of the birth of German theatre, then Karoline Neuber was the midwife.

Born in 1697, Karoline Neuber was to demonstrate one advantage of the socially unacceptable nature of her profession: it allowed her as a woman a far more significant role than would have been possible in the patriarchal structures of conventional society. From her acquaintance with the theatre in Strasbourg, she introduced discipline in speaking and gesture on the French model. Unfortunately this frequently involved meaningless posturing, like placing all one's weight on one foot while the toes of the other foot barely touched the ground or using curved gestures with the arms (*portebbras*). However, the seriousness of her approach attracted the attention of the academic and critic, Johann Christoph Gottsched, and in 1727 he invited her to assist in the reform of the theatre. Lacking any substantial national tradition, they

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both turned to the French for their inspiration, Gottsched committing the absurdity of translating the tragedies of Corneille and Racine into German alexandrines. While rhyming hexameter couplets based on the syllabic structure of French prosody create a strikingly elegant medium for French tragedy, in German verse, which is based like English on stresses, alexandrines come across as excruciatingly plodding doggerel. Furthermore, the neo-classical unities of place, time and action added theatrical constraints to performance, which rendered Karoline Neuber's work even more lifeless. This obsession with structure was taken to such an extent that in the case of the three-act piece *Fausse Agnès* by Destouches, which was translated by Gottsched's wife, the cast had to leave the stage on the pretext of first taking coffee and later a meal in order to create the 'necessary' five acts.

While Karoline Neuber achieved the distinction of twice performing at a court theatre (in 1734 and 1735), her well-intentioned efforts predictably met with little public acclaim, and there was not as yet an established body of intellectuals who might have recognized the value of her innovations. Her personal career went into decline. Her troupe's visit to the Russian court proved a financial catastrophe, and in 1740 she quarrelled with Gottsched and broke off relations with him. She died in 1760 near Dresden, alone and in poverty. It is a sign of the low regard in which her profession was held that her coffin was not allowed to pass through the church gate into the graveyard but had to be lowered over the wall.

Perhaps Karoline Neuber's greatest contribution to eighteenth-century German theatre lay not so much in what she achieved herself but in the possibilities she opened up for those who were to follow. Notable amongst these was Johann Friedrich Schönemann, who had worked with Neuber for ten years before founding his own troupe in 1740. Schönemann's acting style appears characteristic of the first half of the eighteenth century. He played Corneille's Essex 'with a rigid expression and with his eyes always closed . . . (in those days this was supposed to indicate nobility!)'.⁵ In 1750 the Duke of Mecklenburg in Schwerin offered Schönemann patronage, requiring him to spend eight months a year at Schwerin, but allowing him four months to tour, a period which the troupe usually spent in Hamburg. This kind of arrangement, which