New plays and operas have often tried to upset the status quo or disturb the assumptions of theater audiences. Yet, as this study explores, the reactions of the audience or of the authorities are often more extreme than the creators had envisaged, to include outrage, riots, protests, or censorship. *Scandal on Stage* looks at ten famous theater scandals of the past two centuries in Germany and France as symptoms of contemporary social, political, ethical, and aesthetic upheavals. The writers and composers concerned, including Schiller, Stravinsky, Strauss, Brecht, and Weill, portrayed new artistic and ideological ideas that came into conflict with the expectations of their audiences. In a comparative perspective, Theodore Ziolkowski shows how theatrical scandals reflect or challenge cultural and ethical assumptions and asks whether theater can still be, as Schiller wrote, a moral institution—one that successfully makes its audience think differently about social, political, and ethical questions.

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SCANDAL ON STAGE: EUROPEAN THEATER AS MORAL TRIAL

THEODORE ZIOLKOWSKI
For Fran Benson and George Cody

Friends, neighbors, theater devotees
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The organization of this book reflects its genesis. My thoughts on theatrical scandals were initially triggered by the public uproar in the fall of 2006 occasioned by the cancellation of Mozart’s *Idomeneo* at the Deutsche Oper in Berlin. As I followed the controversy during a stay in that city, my thoughts led me in several directions. I began to ruminate on the emergence and dominant, even domineering, role of *Regietheater* (“director’s theater”) in the late twentieth century and to wonder whether its justification on the basis of the venerable principle of “freedom of art” was real or imagined, logical or spurious. At the same time I was wondering about the historical and social conditions necessary before scandal on stage could occur. Why do we hear so rarely of “scandal”—at least in the modern sense of the outcry emerging from the aesthetic conflict between tradition and innovation or from the ethical clash between competing systems of belief and value—before the eighteenth century? Those speculations led me, finally, to ask if “scandal” in those senses could perhaps mask a deeper intention on the part of the author and signal a socially revealing reaction on the part of the audience. Could scandal in fact be a response to the effective use of the theater as a moral institution in Schiller’s famous sense of the term? And if so, is that function still valid today?

At that point my theoretical reflections prompted me, as theory always should, to test them against the praxis of history. Within a few minutes I came up with an obvious list of ten renowned theatrical scandals over the course of some two centuries and not limited to drama but also embracing opera, ballet, and oratorio. I confess at the outset that my list comprises in most cases works of literature and music I have long cherished and gave me the perfect excuse to re-read old favorites and to spend happy hours listening to music I love. Was it possible to detect common denominators underlying and linking the scandals that accompanied their premieres?

My list of course makes no claim to completeness: this book is not a catalogue or survey but a study of representative cases from various
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periods and genres. The list consists of works renowned in their respective contexts—works that have received a considerable amount of attention from specialists. While the interpretation in each case is my own, I have not sought primarily to add yet further work-analyses to that already vast corpus. Instead, I set out to consider the biographical circumstances surrounding their composition and the social conditions surrounding their premieres, to ask within those contexts why a particular work aroused a particular response, and to test on these ten specific examples Schiller’s notion of theater as a site of moral trial. I would like to believe that the comparative study of works from different countries, periods, and genres puts them into new perspectives that expose fresh aspects for their understanding and appreciation. I hope, too, that the method used here may be applied illuminatingly to other examples that occur to readers from different areas of expertise.

I should stress at the outset that this is a work of literary and cultural history and that my approach as a literary historian/critic differs distinctly from those of theater historians or students of performance art. I have perused a number of those studies with attention and appreciation although few of them deal with the periods or works that concern me here. Susan Bennett’s fundamental examination of Theatre Audiences, through its “theorization of audience,” offers valuable insights into the production and reception of stage works but cites specific examples only briefly in passing.1 Similarly, Daphna Ben Chaim’s Distance in the Theatre develops an “aesthetics of audience response” but considers primarily theoretical works and few actual performances.2 While both works heightened my sensitivity to aspects of audience response generally, they had little relevance for the history and analysis of the specific works that concern me here. James H. Johnson’s Listening in Paris constitutes a fascinating cultural history of listening and sharply characterizes shifts in public response to, and behavior at, musical performances in France between 1750 and 1830, arriving at conclusions that are often applicable, mutatis mutandis, to theatrical as well as musical performances and to Germany as well as France.3 Neil Blackadder’s brilliant Performing Opposition: Modern Theater and the Scandalized Audience, which takes up three of the ten works that I consider, focuses on the dynamics of scandal during the period from 1889 to 1931—that is, the complex choreography of interaction between theater and audience and within the audience itself, based on theoretical models involving audience sociology, reception theory, theater design, and norms of social behavior, but leaving aside the intention of the author.4 I have gratefully acknowledged his contributions to my understanding in the
appropriate places. Anya Peterson Royce’s *Anthropology of the Performing Arts* takes an approach that is quite remote from my own but provides through its cross-cultural perspective certain basic insights: for instance, that such diverse forms as *commedia dell’arte*, kabuki theater, and classical ballet all depend on a consensus between audience and performers on certain conventions of genre that must be honored.

My own work, in contrast, is based on a conception that is at once comparative, that extends historically from 1782 to 1968, and that embraces musical compositions as well as drama. My approach is aesthetic and ethical, emphasizing in each case the work as art and the artist’s expressed intention in creating it. Within those specific contexts I examine the extent to which those intentions were fulfilled or lost in the audience’s and critics’ response to the premiere performance. I am fully aware of the central theory governing studies in reception aesthetics: that any work consists of the accumulated readings and/or performances it has undergone since its inception and that the author’s original “intention” becomes irrelevant. However one may regard that theory, it can be plausibly argued on the basis of biographical evidence that artists often express an explicit intention with respect to their work and that at least the premiere performance during the artist’s own lifetime fulfills as effectively as possible that intention—or not, as the creator’s occasional first-night indignation suggests. Throughout I have been guided by Schiller’s conception of the theater as a moral institution, which I propose as a theoretical tool with which to explore larger issues exposed by the initial scandal on stage. I hope that readers from theater history and performance studies will find my work as complementarily useful to their own as I have done with theirs.

Finally, I should make it clear that my unhappiness with the extremes to which *Regietheater* of recent decades, and notably in Germany, has all too frequently allowed itself to be carried is a matter of personal taste and judgment. This is an issue on which opinions are strongly divided, as was evident already in the fundamental 1993 essays by Thomas Zabka and Adolf Dresen in *Dichter und Regisseure* and more recently in the conference papers in *OperMachtTheaterBilder* as well as Johanna Dombois and Richard Klein’s article on *Regietheater* in opera. If a director wishes to add through gesture, gaze, and rhetorical emphasis a Freudian slant to his production of *Hamlet*, that is a legitimate interpretative approach. But if he has his Hamlet exclaim, “I want to fuck my mother,” as was the case in a production in Bochum (cited by Zabka), he is doing violence to Shakespeare’s text and its subtlety of meaning. However, it is not my bias that matters here. What matters is simply the fact that *Regietheater*
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represents in today’s discourse about theater and opera one of the more radical positions regarding “freedom of art” and “scandal” and must therefore be taken into account in that context (in my Introduction and Conclusion). For the history of the ten actual scandals treated in Chapters 2–6, “Regietheater,” as a late-twentieth-century phenomenon, is irrelevant.

I am grateful to Linda Bree at Cambridge University Press for her encouragement and support as she shepherded my manuscript through the editorial process. Thanks to her resourcefulness I gained the benefit of two knowledgeable and perspicacious readers, whose perspectives, insights, and suggestions have appreciably improved my text. Also at Cambridge, Maartje Scheltens guided me patiently and skillfully through the publication procedures. Michael Assmann of the Deutsche Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung came to my assistance quickly and generously with bibliographical references, and music critic Wolfgang Stähr kindly sent me copies of his helpful essays on the premieres of Das Floß der Medusa and of Bartók’s Der wunderbare Mandarin. My friends and colleagues, Professor Jürgen Kohler of Greifswald and Professor Harold James here at Princeton University, easily solved a couple of legal and historical riddles that had puzzled me. Finally, I could not have carried out this research without the rich resources of Princeton University’s Firestone Library, including its Interlibrary Loan department, and the splendid Mendel Music Library. Peter Harrington at Brown University Library generously provided the digital image of Die Muskete for the cover and frontispiece from the Anne S.K. Brown Military Collection. My daughter, Professor Margaret Ziolkowski, offered valuable references for the historical background to Stravinsky’s Le Sacre du printemps my son, Professor Jan Ziolkowski, alerted me to the scandal surrounding Mary Garden’s Salome in New York; and my son, Professor Eric Ziolkowski, contributed insights into the differences between scandal and blasphemy. Since theater is by definition a collaborative event, I am again indebted to my wife Yetta, who has shared with me various performances—though not the scandalous premieres!—of many of the works here considered and offered me her invariably frank and penetrating responses.