Introduction: why write a book about the theatre in the Third Reich?

Theatre played a significant role in German national life before and during the Second World War. It was a genuine mass phenomenon involving millions of Germans and Austrians. The German repertoire system, and the lavish funding that sustained it, enabled the stage to hold its own even in competition with the cinema. An extensive network of state and municipal theatres gave the theatre a greater geographical and social range than in other countries. The role it had played in defining German national identity from the eighteenth century onwards lent it additional prestige. In the Weimar years, moreover, theatre had become one of the principal battle grounds in the 'cultural wars' between left and right. There were heated exchanges in council chambers, furious polemics in the press, and in the playhouses themselves, 'incidents', boycotts and barely disguised threats.

These threats and the violent expulsion of the Weimar cultural elite after 1933 have inevitably shaped perceptions of theatre in the Third Reich ever since. Outside Germany, and to an extent inside Germany too, the Nazi years are perceived as a yawning gap in the history of the German stage, a black hole of destruction from which no light can escape. It is telling that six decades on from the fall of the Reich, not a single full-length study exists in English of the German stage in the Nazi era, and in German, too, the ongoing neglect is striking. That neglect is all the more remarkable given the attention lavished by the regime on the stage and the vast political and financial investment in the theatre made by the Nazis.

This book, then, seeks to fill a gap and to explore some of the things that happened to, in and around the theatre between 1933 and

1945. The aim is to provide a clearer picture overall of the development of the German stage in the twentieth century, and a more rounded view of life in the Third Reich. The book does not intend to provide a revisionist perspective on the course of German and Austrian culture, but it has been guided by the thought that if theatre under the swastika had been as uniformly bad as some of the returning émigrés claimed after 1945, then the playhouses in the Reich would surely have collapsed; for even in a dictatorship people cannot be *made* to go to the theatre, if they have no desire to do so. The book will thus both highlight areas where Nazi theatre incontrovertibly failed and areas where something more successful emerged, either by design or accident.

The first six chapters of the book probe the ideological intentions that shaped the theatre in the Third Reich. Chapters 1 and 2 explore both the immediate and the wider background. The third considers the reasons for the striking proliferation of history plays and some of the inherent problems playwrights encountered after 1933. The fourth chapter then explores the way theatre became a factor in the relationship of the German people with their neighbours, while the fifth sets out the grim detail of Nazi racism on and behind the stage. A chapter on religion and theatre completes the picture. The remaining three chapters then examine the political reality under which theatre had to operate in the Third Reich: censorship in all its forms, the combination of patronage and intimidation, the clash between propagandistic intent and traditional German concepts of *Kultur*, and finally the trajectory of German theatre from the near-bankruptcy of the 1932–3 season via conspicuous Nazi opulence to the physical destruction of the war years.

1 Weimar: politics in the playhouse

Theatres were among the first Nazi targets during the Seizure of Power: several of Germany's municipal or state playhouses were symbolically stormed by SA detachments; others were taken over by Nazi activists who had been operating for some time inside individual theatre companies.[1] Within a few weeks of Hitler becoming chancellor, the swastika flag was flying on most German theatres. In the wake of the flags came various supervision committees, which began to translate the symbolic takeover into a real one.[2] Theatre had possessed high political significance in the Weimar republic. It had probably been the most consistently controversial branch of the arts.[3] Inevitably, it was also the first part of German culture to undergo thorough nazification. The threats, betrayals and general brutality involved have been chronicled in the testimonies and memoirs of those silenced inside Germany after 1933.[4] Their tale is one of a culture snuffed out: of its exponents driven into exile or premature retirement, and its plays and practices banished for more than a decade. As the Third Reich expanded, the devastation spread. Yet more people were forced out of their positions in the theatre, and some had to flee a second or even a third time. Unsurprisingly, the tone of these accounts is sombre. They echo Sir Edward Grey's famous words, voiced some thirty years earlier: of the lamps going out over Europe, never to be lit again in the writers' lifetime.

Historians, theatre specialists and literary critics have largely followed that perspective. It is a view based on sound critical judgement. At its heart lies the contrast between the excellence of the ousted culture and the frequently mediocre offerings that sought to

take its place. Yet it is not just a question of weighing Nazi culture and finding it wanting. The traditional ideal of scholarly detachment is difficult to sustain in the light of Nazism's record. Not a few theatre practitioners were driven to suicide; many more vanished in the Third Reich's killing apparatus.[5] In the case of Nazi Germany, even cultural historians or literary critics will find themselves confronted with evidence of murder.

Such knowledge has informed the research. It has tended to influence the perspective of accounts as much as their tone. Focusing on the culture of the victims (rather than the preferences of the persecutors) has been, at least in part, a posthumous attempt to right the wrongs of the 1930s and 1940s. It is an honourable stance but it comes at a price. It obscures from our view a large part of the historical reality of 1933, and of the cultural scene in the preceding years.[6] It runs the risk of portraying Nazi thugs in isolation, as though they had suddenly erupted out of nowhere. It implies, moreover, that the Nazi party and its constituency were uniformly strangers to culture. Yet this is not the case; the various artistic interests of the Nazi hierarchy are well documented, and the party also included a substantial number of dedicated theatregoers.[7] These particular theatre audiences, and a great many more outside the Nazi party, did not regard 1933 as darkness descending. They hailed it – often very vocally – as a bright new dawn.

A study of the Third Reich's theatre needs to take account of that. It must seek to explain why some cultured Germans should actually have rejoiced at the purge of the theatres in 1933. To do this we must leave behind the familiar metropolitan atmosphere of Berlin and turn to the provinces. For that is where Nazi theatre had its artistic, intellectual and political roots.

The word 'provincial' is not a neutral term in most languages. It tends to suggest, at the very least, a certain lack of sophistication. Yet, this is misleading in a German context. For unlike French or English culture, German cultural life had traditionally been highly decentralised.[8] Lack of political unity had enriched the nation culturally. The parallel with Ancient Greece so dear to German nationalist hearts contained perhaps a grain of truth: the institutions of high culture

were indeed more broadly diffused in Germany than in most other European countries.[9]

Theatre had reflected this. Munich, Frankfurt, Dresden, Hamburg, Düsseldorf, Leipzig or Stuttgart were artistically far from provincial. Their theatres shone and often eclipsed many genuine capital cities elsewhere, including – repeatedly – Berlin itself. Yet that is not all: the survival up to 1918 of the old German kingdoms and principalities had added a further dimension. Princely ambition came into play. Take, for instance, the quixotic Prince of Reuß, who ran his own theatre company even after 1918: directing it, supporting dramatists and occasionally writing plays for it himself.[10] His private funds kept the venture afloat even in the dark days of the depression. Only the Red Army would finally snuff out the Reuß theatre tradition.

Most German ruling houses favoured less immediate forms of cultural ambition. Yet this still translated into substantial support for the stage. It allowed even very small *Residenzstädte* – the quintessentially German 'court towns' – to compete with the larger urban centres. In the latter half of the nineteenth century German acting and directing styles had in fact been revolutionised by one such court theatre: that of the diminutive duchy of Saxe-Meiningen and its exiguous capital. The 'Meiningen style' proved as influential on the German stage as the Meiningen orchestra did in the Western symphonic tradition.[11] It was only the Weimar republic that finally swept aside Meiningen's theatrical legacy, along with the institution of the court theatre itself.

The end of the monarchies in 1918 altered the theatrical scene: the court theatres became state institutions. Their funding now depended on box office takings and subsidies from regional bodies.[12] While theatres in large states like Prussia adapted successfully, those in the smaller *Residenzstädte* struggled to survive. The financial instability of the Weimar republic, together with changed leisure habits and the rise of the cinema, also posed serious challenges to Germany's many municipal theatres. Conditions improved temporarily in the mid-1920s, but it was only a reprieve. By the end of the republic, numerous theatres were threatened with closure or were

being forcibly merged with companies from neighbouring cities.[13] The mood was correspondingly sombre. Talk of the imminent disappearance of theatre as an art form was widespread.[14]

Berlin did not escape the general crisis, yet, as the largest conurbation by far, there were economies of scale working in its favour. It also received generous press coverage, which allowed Berlin theatre to radiate out into the provinces. The presence in Berlin of what was then the world's largest film industry also benefited the city's theatre culture: actors began to work both for the studios and the stage. Theatres in the rest of Germany found it hard to compete. Outside Germany, the cultural dominance of one city might seem natural; to many Germans it was a new and unwelcome phenomenon.

Berlin's pre-eminence was enhanced by events abroad. The collapse of the Habsburg Empire had weakened the competition across the border. After 1918, the desperate penury of the new Austrian republic progressively dimmed the glow of the Viennese stage. Many of its younger talents began to gravitate to Berlin. By 1929 the satirist Erich Kästner was moved to observe, 'Berlin actors, as everyone knows, are without exception Viennese.' Eventually, this would itself become a factor in the political equation. It would cripple the Austrian government's attempts, after January 1933, to use culture as a weapon against the Third Reich.[15]

Prague was almost entirely eclipsed. The marginalisation of Austro-German culture by the new Czech authorities robbed that traditionally bilingual city of one of its great historical assets. The old German Landestheater had been at the forefront of artistic innovation even during the war. With a large pool of literary and artistic talent, and an economy unburdened by reparations, the new Czechoslovak state could have been a major player in Austro-German culture after 1918. Projecting itself abroad in theatre, film or print might ultimately have been in its own political interests. Yet it threw away that chance.[16] What Prussia had failed to achieve on the battlefield was thus thrust upon her in defeat: her capital, for better or worse, was now the undisputed centre of *Mitteleuropa*.

The equation in the popular mind of the inter-war years with the bustle of Berlin is therefore not entirely unjustified. The problem

arises with how one interprets that bustle. We now tend to focus, retrospectively, on the cultural foment of a great metropolis come into its own. Many contemporaries noticed only the impoverished scene in the rest of the German lands.[17] To them, post-war culture seemed in its metropolitan bias alone a catastrophic departure from German tradition.

The Nazi party sided with those who had lost out, and drew strength from their grievances. It is no accident that National Socialism began in Munich, or that the first town it conquered through the ballot box was Coburg. Munich had 'glowed' culturally, as Thomas Mann put it, in the days of the monarchy. It was grey and exhausted in the republic. Coburg had disappeared altogether from wider view: 1918 saw it demoted from *Residenzstadt*, complete with palace, court theatre and royal relations on half the thrones of Europe, to lifeless provincial backwater.

Nazi theatre, like National Socialism in general, sprang from the wish to reverse that decline. The party and the culture it favoured both wore their regional badges with defiance. Embracing 'small town' Germany promised electoral gains. It also allowed the Nazi party to portray itself as the true heir and defender of German tradition. After all, the spiritual home of German *Kulturpatriotismus* – the town of Weimar – was itself a small provincial town.

Weimar tends these days to be equated in Britain and America with the republic to which it had lent its name. That association is one of history's most sublime jests: as improbable in its way as an English republic proclaimed in Stratford-upon-Avon. To Germans the primary association of the name 'Weimar' continues to be cultural: not *Republik* but *Klassik*; Goethe and Schiller, Herder and Wieland, and the Golden Age of German Literature. That association has given the town a unique status. To many, it has represented the very soul of Germany.[18] Coincidentally or not, Weimar also became an early stronghold of the Nazi party. Long before 1933, Weimar's hallowed literary institutions were, in the words of a perceptive observer, 'Nazi-infested, without being able to account for it to themselves'.[19]

That connection between high culture and National Socialism in the town of Goethe was not without consequences. It conferred a degree

1 The Reichsdramaturg Rainer Schlösser, the head of the Nazi theatre administration and the Reich's chief theatre censor.

of respectability on the Nazi movement, it provided a pattern for other parts of Germany, and it created a network of cultural activists who shaped the Reich's *Kultur* after 1933.[20] That was perhaps especially true of the theatre. Weimar had been home, for instance, to Rainer Schlösser. As Reichsdramaturg, an office and a title invented for him, he would become head of the Nazis' theatre administration and the chief censor of the Third Reich's stage. Schlösser could claim the Weimar classics as his birthright. His father had been a professor of literature and director of the prestigious Goethe-and-Schiller Archive. His younger brother went on to become a noted Shakespeare scholar. (Weimar had been, since Goethe's day, the official headquarters of Germany's Shakespeareans.)[21] The town,

in other words, possessed a recognisable cultural aristocracy, into which Schlösser had been born.[22] It provided an ideal launchpad for his own career as a literary critic. This, in turn, was to bring him to the attention of the emerging Nazi hierarchy. Weimar was also home to Hans Severus Ziegler. Ziegler, like Schlösser, possessed a doctorate in German Literature and contributed to the same right-wing literary journals.[23] He, too, caught the eye of the party hierarchy. When the Nazis first tasted regional power in 1930, Ziegler was invited into government. He was given control of the theatres in the state of Thuringia, which contained the town of Weimar (and the old principalities of Reuß and Saxe-Meiningen, which we encountered earlier).[24] Weimar, moreover, offered a publishing platform to the young dramatist Hanns Johst, who was to provide Nazi theatre with several canonical plays, and who would go on to become president of Goebbels' Reich Chamber of Literature.[25] Weimar, finally, was home also to Baldur von Schirach: another central figure in the Nazi cultural establishment. Schirach, too, had contributed to the literary journals that published Schlösser and Ziegler. In the Third Reich, Schirach became leader of the Hitler Youth: a position he used, amongst other things, to develop a Nazi Youth Theatre and to sponsor aspirant Nazi dramatists.[26] Later still, as the Führer's vice-regal representative in Vienna, Schirach was an influential patron of the arts, powerful enough to take on Goebbels even. Schirach, like Schlösser, wrote competent verse and had the classics coursing through his veins: his father, Carl von Schirach, had been *Intendant* – artistic and managing director – of Weimar's court theatre: the very institution Goethe had led a century earlier.

The point about all this is simple enough: the usual epithets for Nazi activists – 'barbarian', 'semi-literate' or 'philistine' – clearly do not describe these men. The Weimar group were men of some ability, and even of literary flair. Schlösser and Schirach also possessed undoubted elegance and style. In Goethe's day, they might have been praised for their 'refined manners and sensibilities'.[27] Nazi theatre, therefore, cannot simply be explained away as the triumph of barbarism and the second-rate.[28]

The biographies of the Weimar group reveals a further important aspect: the role of the year 1918 in disrupting individual lives,

and the lasting bitterness this often produced. It is a commonplace in the historical literature that entire sections of German society rejected the republic. The imperial officer corps, in particular, never forgave the 'November State' for depriving them of their privileged position. This was exactly the case of the Reichsdramaturg Rainer Schlösser, whose own youthful hopes of a military career had ended abruptly in 1918.[29] For Schlösser there followed years of financial hardship. The sudden experience of poverty, after a comfortable boyhood, achieved what even the war had failed to do: it put iron in his soul.

Others despaired: Baldur von Schirach's elder brother took his own life. The collapse of everything he had believed in, combined with the prospect of unemployment, made death seem preferable. A few weeks later, it was the turn of Schirach-*père* to find himself unemployed. Carl von Schirach was summarily dismissed from his post as *Intendant* by the new Social Democrat minister of culture.[30] The minister felt that princely appointments should not survive into the republican era.[31] For Schirach, therefore, the new beginning began with the death of a son and an irreparable blow to his own career. Middle-aged and diligent, rather than inspired, he found himself competing against an army of younger men returning from the trenches. Unsurprisingly, he failed to secure another post anywhere. It was only fifteen years later – in 1933 – that he would come to lead a theatre again: then it would be the turn of the republic's supporters to be purged from office.[32]

Schirach's dismissal had been no isolated case. As the old court theatres were converted into republican institutions, there was an almost complete change in artistic management. Some *Intendanten* followed the example of their princes and abdicated, so to speak; others were simply sacked.[33] The revolution may have left intact the traditional bastions of conservatism in the Army (or what was left of it), in the civil service and education but it was rather more thorough in the theatre.[34] Histories of Weimar culture tend not to dwell upon this fact. We are told, for instance, in one classic account, that the great Leopold Jeßner was 'imposed' on Berlin's Prussian State Theatre in 1919.[35] But the incident is presented as an example of modernist light