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German theatre, 1600–1848

EDITED BY GEORGE W. BRANDT

Introduction

This volume in the series, *Theatre in Europe*, covers the period 1600 to 1848; it is divided into two parts, the first dealing with German and the second with Dutch theatre. Obviously one cannot hope to give more than an overall picture of a complex development over so long a time-span. In the case of German theatre history, the impossibility of quoting every relevant document is due not only to the great social and political changes Germany underwent in the course of two and a half centuries – something that could equally well be said of other countries – but more particularly to some specific characteristics of German society which were reflected in the development of its theatre. Inevitably the documentation presented here is selective with no claim to exhaustiveness.

The history of German theatre is, of course, interconnected with that of many other European countries. *Vis-à-vis* the West (England, France, the Netherlands, Italy) Germany received more than it gave, at least in the formative period of its theatre; *vis-à-vis* the East it was to play a more seminal and giving role. Yet for all its links with neighbouring countries, there are significant differences which distinguish it from the pattern of theatre elsewhere, particularly in England and France.

While it is not the case that *all* of English theatre was entirely confined to London nor *all* of French theatre to Paris during this period, the crucial events as regards playwriting and stage performance certainly did take place in those two metropolises. After the demise of locally based religious mediaeval drama, provincial English and French theatre had to look to the centre for inspiration: success was gauged by the extent to which playwrights, managers, actors and other theatre workers made their mark in the capital where the political, social and cultural energies of their respective nations were concentrated.

This was by no means the situation in Germany. There was then no single theatrical or indeed cultural centre for German-speaking countries – and this is to a considerable extent still true today. So as we follow the evolution of the German theatre, we see the focus of our interest shift repeatedly. Certain major centres do indeed stand out over long periods of time – notably the deeply Protestant, flourishing commercial city of Hamburg at one end of the territory and the

devoutly Catholic Imperial city of Vienna at the other. But though these and other cities such as Leipzig, Berlin, Brunswick, Munich also have their key roles to play at various times, no single place can be said to encapsulate the story of German theatre as a whole. The theatrical significance even of these major cities fluctuates according to the whims of rulers, the varying degree of enlightenment of their citizens, the fortunes of war and trade, and other fortuitous factors. In this checkered history relatively minor centres of population such as Ulm, Schwerin, Gotha or Weissenfels come to the fore momentarily. Indeed there are times of greater or lesser duration when the most remarkable theatrical developments are due to the enterprise and initiative of certain individuals of exceptional administrative or creative gifts – such as Baron v. Dalberg in Mannheim, Goethe in Weimar or Immermann in Düsseldorf. The result of this lack of any one single gathering-point for the cultural, or more specifically the theatrical, energies of the German-speaking world is that no presentation of documents can cover absolutely every aspect of what is a local and regional as much as it is a national phenomenon: what we are dealing with is a mosaic rather than a single, well-composed picture.

The principle of selection of documents here is the tracing of a slow ascent, which lagged well behind that of neighbouring countries, of a specifically German theatre with its own style and organisation and, above all, its own repertoire. Admittedly there is some bias in this presentation in favour of the process by which a national corpus of drama came to be forged. It would have been possible to organise the wealth of available material according to different principles. The editor would, however, like to think that facets of the story not wholly subservient to the main thrust of the book have not been neglected.

The decentralised nature of German culture is rooted in history. The Holy Roman Empire ('neither Holy nor Roman nor an Empire', according to a well-known witticism), a loose confederation of states with no clear-cut natural frontiers, from which some Swiss cantons had begun to break away as early as at the end of the thirteenth century and the beginning of the fourteenth; torn asunder in the sixteenth century by the Reformation and then, as a result of that religious schism, devastated in the following century by the Thirty Years' War, a catastrophe with disastrous long-term physical and cultural consequences – this political structure had in fact always lacked internal cohesion. In his *De statu imperii germanici* (1667), the jurist Samuel Pufendorf described its constitution as irregular, indeed as resembling a monster. We recall the tipsy students in Auerbach's cellar, in Goethe's *Faust*, mocking the Holy Roman Empire. The Empire's centrifugal nature did not allow any one court (not even that of the Emperor) nor any one administrative, ecclesiastical or commercial centre unquestionably to represent all the cultural energies of such an extensive territory in the

heart of the Continent. The spread of absolutism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries strengthened the power of electors and princelings; it only further debilitated that of the Emperor. By the eighteenth century, the Empire was little more than a legal fiction; it consisted of some 300 states with a greater or lesser degree of virtual independence; if the territories of local magnates were to be included in this list, this number would come to well over 2,000 states and mini-states. We find Germany divided by borders, customs regulations, laws, religion, dialect and lifestyle. Weights and measures differed from territory to territory. The profusion of different currencies (*Gulden, Taler, Schilling, Kreuzer, Batzen, Ablus, Stüber, Groschen, Pfennig, Mark, Heller*) indicated the depth of *Kleinstaaterei* (little-statism) throughout the Empire. (This monetary chaos among the German states also complicates theatre history in that it makes it harder exactly to assess the precise meaning of sums of money involved in contracts, ticket prices, travel costs etc.)

The particularism which forms such a striking contrast to the more centralised administrations of Britain and France was a political fact that for a long time inhibited the development in Germany of a *professional* theatre, the very art form which depends more than any other on basically urban, intellectually curious mass audiences sharing broad cultural values.

The stress here is advisedly on the word 'professional'. Non-professional types of performance public or private abound from the beginning of our period. There were courtly and aristocratic types of celebratory, largely emblematic, theatre couched in an essentially international idiom, very similar to those flourishing at the courts of Italy, France, England and Spain; these continued to exist in some form or other up to the latter part of the eighteenth century. People at the other end of the social spectrum were also entertained by nonprofessional theatre. The *meistersinger* drama of an earlier period had not disappeared; although this type of guild drama was already in its decline by the beginning of our period, the *meistersingers* of Augsburg built a theatre of their own as late as 1665 and in some towns continued their existence until the eighteenth century. A more important aspect of nonprofessional theatre were the school performances which played such a conspicuous role in seventeenth- (and even eighteenth-) century education.

But the plays of Protestant schools and those staged, often with considerable scenic sophistication and enormous casts, at Jesuit colleges (the latter sharing a playmaking style and ethos with similar institutions in other Catholic countries) had primarily didactic rather than purely aesthetic aims. The main point of the exercise – apart from advertising the merits of the school – was to teach the pupils eloquence and decent deportment by making them perform in specially written plays that would convey sound lessons of conduct and doctrine to actors and

spectators alike. (To be sure, apologists for the professional theatre would stress until the latter part of the eighteenth century that it, too, was 'useful' in that it exalted virtue and either ridiculed or castigated vice.) Now, all this was a far cry from the ideal of a professional class of actors performing in fixed venues who would provide the nation, or at any rate the educated section of it, with vivid images of life as nourishment for its imagination.

It was in this sense of theatre as a vital cultural institution that Germany, because of its social structure, made its entrance upon the scene markedly later than its Western neighbours. The German bourgeoisie, politically weak compared to that of France, let alone that of England, was unable to assert itself confidently against the cultural dominance of the ruling classes and did not manage until the last quarter of the eighteenth century to find its own voice, at any rate in the theatre. To say this is not, of course, to decry middle-class German cultural development as such. It is a striking fact that German music, with its deep folk roots and inspired by religion, flourished greatly at a time when drama was still quite underdeveloped. The patricians of Hamburg supported German opera in a specially built opera-house from 1678 to 1738. German opera even enjoyed the patronage of *minor* courts though the greater ones tended to favour the more expensive and prestigious Italian variety. One simple comparison will make clear the relative states of musical and theatrical culture. The city of Leipzig witnessed the first performance of Bach's *St Matthew Passion*, that profoundly dramatic oratorio which is one of the crowning glories of European music, in 1727; the première in the same city in 1731 of the first German 'regular' play, the local university professor Gottsched's *Der sterbende Cato*, which after its performance by the Neuber company was hailed as a milestone in German drama, ranks as a cultural feat on an incomparably lower level, of minor significance in the wider European context.

It is not surprising in view of the lack of a single cultural centre that German professional theatre over long stretches of its history was open to foreign influence. The first fully professional actors seen in German-speaking lands on a relatively massive scale were the Englishmen who toured many parts of Northern and Central Europe from the 1580s onwards. The keen competition among companies in an England bursting with dramatic vitality made theatrical virgin territories abroad seem a tempting business prospect. These players, often referred to in Germany as 'English Comedians', would sometimes be employed by a court; at other times they would play for the general public in whatever performance spaces they could secure. Bringing with them an exciting repertoire of new plays, these visitors were to confront their barely professional German confreres with much higher standards of skill, even though their offerings were probably greatly inferior to what English audiences would have seen in the playhouses of London.

A performance in an *ad hoc* venue to spectators unable to grasp the literary subtleties of the dialogue, which therefore had to be coarsened in order to be visually readable, was bound to be a more rough-and-ready entertainment than one offered of an afternoon at the Globe.

English influence was in the ascendant in the first half of the seventeenth century (the companies continuing to bear the English label in the latter part of the century were essentially German). In the second half of that as well as the following century French and Italian players were the dominant influence, at least as far as courtly audiences were concerned. After the Thirty Years' War, German courts prided themselves on being able to maintain a company of French actors: Hanover and Celle shared the services of such a company as early as 1668; and this aristocratic fashion of aping the court of Versailles continued well into the latter part of the eighteenth century. The Italian presence came on the one hand in the shape of *commedia dell'arte* troupes who had first made their appearance in the sixteenth century. (The stock figures of the Italian comedy and their *lazzi* were taken up by German actors; as in the case of the English Comedians, many of the best-known later *commedia* players were in fact German, e.g. the Harlequin J.F. Müller and the Pantaloon J.P. Hilverding in the eighteenth century.) On the other hand – and this was a more profound and long-lasting influence – there were the imported singers, composers and librettists who had made Italian opera the principal court entertainment, ever since the performances in 1618 of this new kind of spectacle in the Prince-Archbishop's 'rock theatre' of Hellbrunn in Salzburg. Opera, on which princes would squander vast sums of money, by far outshone the spoken drama at court. (But intimately linked as the operatic and the dramatic stage are in German theatre history in terms of theatrical architecture, repertoire-planning and the skills expected from actors as well as singers, this book, not being concerned with it as such, will only refer to opera incidentally.) In the related field of ballet, professional dancers also tended in the main to be either French or Italian.

The Italians led the way in other respects too, in Germany as elsewhere: theatrical architecture followed the guidelines laid down by the Italian scenic stage, in the first instance applying them on a large scale more to opera-houses than to playhouses. Italian architects and designers were active in the German lyric and dramatic theatre for a very long time: the Burnacini – father and son – in the seventeenth, Giuseppe Galli-Bibiena in the eighteenth and the Quaglio family up to the latter part of the nineteenth century are merely representative examples of this crucial cultural exchange. We even find Italians such as Nicolini or Bellomo as managers of German companies until well into the eighteenth century.

Stimulating as these external influences may have been, they did nothing to advance the prestige of the indigenous player. The origins of German professional

acting are wrapped in obscurity; such companies as existed before the Thirty Years' War remain faceless and are traceable in the main only through their applications to the authorities for permission to perform. It is not until the second half of the seventeenth century that certain *Prinzipale* or actor-managers – for example, Treu, Paulsen and Velten – begin to emerge somewhat more clearly.

These men ran companies which gained a wide reputation not only at courts but also among the theatrically inclined public at large, the latter of course only amounting to a small proportion of the still predominantly rural German people. The fact that some actors had been to university suggests a certain increase in the prestige of the profession. In the early part of the century, German companies seem to have been composed entirely of men, as had also been the case in England (though not in the Latin countries). But now women were at last beginning to be accepted on stage; indeed towards the end of the century there were women in charge of some companies. In the following century, Frau Neuber, the actress who did much to raise the standing of what was still a marginalised profession, not only ran a company jointly with her husband but actually enjoyed a greater reputation and authority than he did.

The main respect in which German actors differed for a long time from their English and French confreres was the peripatetic nature of their calling. Strolling players were a not insignificant part of the profession elsewhere; but in Germany even the leading actors were condemned exclusively to a touring mode of existence until the middle of the eighteenth century. Even after (usually brief) experiments of working as resident companies such as Schönemann's company being established as court actors by the Duke of Mecklenburg at his Schloss in Schwerin in 1750 or the actor-manager K. A. Ackermann building the first ever privately managed theatre in Königsberg in 1755, the life of German actors continued by and large to be one of constant travelling. This meant that companies, generally consisting of some sixteen or seventeen actors working under the direction of a *Prinzipal*, had to spend a great part of their lives on the road, carrying with them their necessarily rudimentary scenery and home-made costumes as well as their families, and perform either in existing venues only roughly adapted to theatrical purposes or else in temporary wooden booths specially erected at their own expense. Since audiences were small in any but the largest cities, players had to be ready to offer a wide and varied repertoire. Theatrical discipline tended to be poor, rehearsals few and little more than walk-throughs; the company's own jealously guarded stock of texts would be all too often supplemented by more or less skilled improvisation. This was obviously not the way to achieve the highest standards of performance, nor was it an encouragement to German men of letters to write for the stage. The repertoire was extremely heterogeneous and of generally inferior literary quality. Instead of

being original German creations, most plays would be directly or indirectly derived from English, French, Dutch, Italian or Spanish sources; frequently they were adaptations from opera libretti. It is this state of affairs that made Luigi (Louis) Riccoboni assign a distinctly modest place to the German theatre of his day and age when comparing the theatres of Italy, Spain, France, England, the Low Countries and Germany in his *Réflexions historiques et critiques sur les différens Théâtres de l'Europe* (Paris: Guerin, 1738).

The distances covered by these touring companies were often considerable. It must be remembered that up to our century, German speakers – either as the majority population or as an influential minority – were more widely dispersed throughout Europe than they are today. Theatrical performances in German might be given in places as far apart as Strasbourg and Hermannstadt (in Transylvania), in Agram (Zagreb), Prague or Pressburg (Bratislava), in Buda, Riga, Reval (Tallinn) or Warsaw, as well as in the German heartland. At various times there were German companies playing in the Netherlands, in Scandinavia and in Russia where they might find themselves in competition with or serving as a stimulus to actors performing in the national language.¹

But this wide dispersal should not suggest unconnected work by isolated individuals or groups. In fact, companies were constantly breaking up and reforming, with some members leaving and others joining; experiences were exchanged, traditions established. This frequent turnover of personnel made for a good deal of continuity of approach throughout the profession.² To take the example of the Neubers: after beginning their career with the Spiegelberg troupe, they worked with the company of Sophie Elenson-Haack which then became the Elenson-Haack-Hoffmann company; when the latter was disbanded in 1726 the Neubers founded their own company, taking on some of their former colleagues. This company was in turn to produce a number of other leading actor-managers – Schönemann, G.H. Koch, Döbbelin – and, in spite of rivalries between the parent company and these breakaway upstarts, to influence acting styles for some time even after 1750 when the Neubers finally went out of management. Such interchanges, often cemented by marriage, created a network of style and tradition among strolling players, extending over large areas of the German-speaking world. It is thus possible to trace fairly direct lines of descent by which an acting tradition, albeit in a constant state of flux and evolution, was passed on from generation to generation in the eighteenth century. Konrad Ekhof, the

¹ For the impact of German companies on Bohemia, Hungary and Rumania at a rather later date, see Laurence Senelick (ed.), *TIE: National Theatre in Northern and Eastern Europe, 1746–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 231–2 & 240–1, 278–80 and 301–2 respectively.

² For further details on the composition of companies of strolling players, see Eike Pies, *Prinzipale* (Ratingen-Kastellaun-Düsseldorf: Henn, 1973), and W. H. Bruford, *Theatre, Drama and Audiences in Goethe's Germany* (Cambridge University Press, 1950), esp. pp. 30–8.

outstanding actor of the middle years of the eighteenth century, worked with the Neuber pupil Schönemann. Both Iffland and Schröder, the premier actors of the following generation, had in their turn worked with Ekhof in the early stages of their brilliant careers. Gradually something like a German style of acting began to crystallise, although German actors clearly did share many of their stage conventions with those of colleagues in other countries.³

Since there were, and indeed still are today though perhaps to a somewhat lesser extent, many variations of pronunciation and speech rhythms throughout German-speaking territories, there was a real incentive for actors to cultivate a standard diction: this was 'bühnendeutsch', a stage German equally intelligible and acceptable anywhere. Though frequent criticisms make it clear that even by the end of the eighteenth century provincialisms had by no means been expunged from stage speech, such standardisation as was achieved represented a bond between the different parts of a culturally diverse area. Indeed, with the progress of drama around the middle of the eighteenth century, theatre was increasingly felt to be more than just a polite entertainment in which Germans wished to emulate their, in this respect, more advanced French and English neighbours; it was seen as an assertion by the nation of its own cultural distinctiveness. Hence the number of National Theatres that sprang up in the second half of the century as the result both of private and government initiative. Initially this ambition to create a German theatre before the nation had found its own appropriate political and cultural form seemed to be putting the cart before the horse. The collapse in 1769 of the first of these ventures, the short-lived Hamburg Enterprise, after less than two difficult years of existence, caused Lessing, its resident playwright, to comment with bitter irony, in the final instalment of his theatrical bulletin, the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*:

Alas for the naive idea of creating a National Theatre for the Germans when we Germans are not yet a nation! I do not speak of our political constitution but only of our moral character. One might almost say that this is not to have any. We are still the sworn imitators of everything foreign, in particular the humble admirers of the never sufficiently admired French ... (19 April 1768)

But emancipation from overwhelming external influence was at hand: the 1770s saw a qualitative change in the German theatre. As the young Goethe entered upon the playwriting scene together with the other exciting new dramatists of the *Sturm und Drang* generation, not to mention numerous other playwrights all but forgotten now but popular at the time, the public became

³ See Dene Barnett, *The Art of Gesture: The Practice and Principles of 18th-Century Acting* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1987).

aware that the German theatre was no longer merely a pale imitation of foreign models.

From this decade onwards, German theatre was to find its feet quickly; theatrical organisation improved, more and more playhouses were built by private and official enterprise, the Vienna Burgtheater was raised to the status of a National Theatre by Imperial edict in 1776, acting standards everywhere came to be subjected to more informed criticism and, a particularly important point this, a native body of drama of real stature sprang up. The première in 1782 of *Die Räuber* signalled the appearance of Schiller as a playwright of the first magnitude whose further development was to place German drama on a European level of achievement. Goethe's role in this development was crucial, not only as a dominant figure on the literary and intellectual scene but also in a practical capacity as the director of the Weimar court theatre from 1791 to 1817. There he set the example of a director in the modern sense, a man of the theatre not himself a performer but the co-ordinator of all the elements of production. With quite limited means at his disposal he managed to establish new standards of repertory planning; he systematically educated the taste of his audience and – perhaps his principal contribution – he supported Schiller in the creation of a series of dramas which were to become the bedrock of a national repertoire. The patriotic upsurge of the Napoleonic Wars, especially the War of Liberation of 1813–14, set the seal on German theatre as an expression of national culture indispensable not only to the middle class but acceptable even to the hitherto French-inclined upper classes.

One effect of the increasing hold of theatre upon the public's imagination was the growth in the 1770s of a theatrical press. The Gotha court librarian H.A.O. Reichard, who served as administrative director of the Gotha court theatre between 1775 and 1778, published the annual *Theater-Kalender* from 1775 until 1800 (with the exception of the year 1795), as well as the *Theater-Journal für Deutschland* which, planned as a monthly, appeared irregularly from 1777 to 1784. In Berlin C.A.v.Bertram brought out a number of publications – the weeklies *Litteratur- und Theater-Zeitung* (1778–84) and *Ephemeriden der Litteratur und des Theaters* (1785–7) as well as the half-yearly *Annalen des Theaters* (1788–97) – which like his friend Reichard's journals aimed at a nationwide readership. Although these papers devoted a good deal of space to apologetics for the theatre as an institution and to simply chronicling performances or listing the composition of companies rather than providing theatrical reviews in the modern sense, they constitute, together with the numerous other local or regional theatrical journals of the time,⁴ an invaluable primary source of information. Vienna, which

⁴ For a selective though by no means exhaustive listing of German theatrical magazines and journals, see part 4 (periodicals) of the German bibliography, pp. 519–23.