

1 An explosion of ideas in the theatre

Max Reinhardt arrived on the scene at the moment when the modern theatre was exploding with ideas and anxious to try new forms and styles of performance of every kind. The theories of Zola and Wagner, Strindberg and Appia contended for the attention of every theatre artist, and none could be wholly ignored. The physical playhouse was also at a point of special development, and there was a ferment of ideas about its best shape and size, and about the uses of the new electric light and the advance in scenic possibilities that came with it. Following Wagner, Reinhardt saw that the theatre could be the common ground for all the arts, and the writer and critic Hermann Bahr went so far as to claim that it was Reinhardt who “ended for this generation in Germany the sway of the literary play.”¹ It was Reinhardt’s privilege to put into practice some of the thinking of the “aesthetic drama” movement which wanted to combine the arts of space and light, of music, design and the spoken word, and of acting, mime and dance. His invention of the *Regiebuch* as a master promptbook was both a monument to his work – and a necessity if that work was to be carried out.

The Max Reinhardt who captured the attention of non-German-speaking audiences when his productions found their way outside Germany and Austria–Hungary was the Max Reinhardt of the great Greek and Gothic spectacles. For those audiences he was the Herr Professor, the master. There probably never has been a more magnificent group of productions than his *Oedipus*, his *Everyman* and his *Miracle*. The technical resourcefulness displayed in these offerings, not least in shipping them from capital city to capital city, dazzled the critics who knew nothing of his more intimate and experimental work at home, work which nevertheless absorbed most of his time and continued undiminished to his death. Broadcasting on the B.B.C., the British director W. Bridges-Adams said that the shows he took to England “were in the category that the Germans call *Kolossal*. Yet in his own strong way he could be as delicate as he pleased.”² Allan Jackson of the Ohio State University Theatre Research Institute believed that English-speaking countries have a distorted image of his work: “His reputation is for spectacle when it should be for innovation and experimentation.”³ And this has been corroboration.

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rated by his actors. Gerda Redlich said in an interview, "In England Reinhardt is only known through the *World Theatre* [*The Salzburg Great Theatre of the World*] and *Miracle* and that sort of thing, and that – that wasn't his strength: chamber theatre, small detailed, subtle work with actors – that was his real strength. And he was a fantastic teacher."⁴ Robert Ryan, one of his Hollywood Workshop graduates, recently pointed out that *The Miracle* and *Everyman* were by no means the master's favourite productions.⁵

And Reinhardt had his detractors. Even in his own country he was accused of creating only spectacles, of being a mere technician with no true artistic philosophy. As early as 1905, following the celebrated productions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Kleist's *Käthchen von Heilbronn* in Berlin, the cry was heard that he was only a stage decorator, even when it was clear that he was suiting the visual style to the content of the play. Herbert Ihering of the *Berliner Börsenkurier* was among those who did not tire of putting him down: "When at the turn of the century Max Reinhardt brought back the classics, what prospects lay before us? Did he put us into touch with their essentials? Did he try to open up a discussion on the problems of drama? Reinhardt and his times put us into touch only with production."⁶ Reinhardt's visual achievements have been blamed on an over-subsidized theatre, and on his desire to please a bourgeois audience. Because he tried to widen the range of the stage after the narrow effects of naturalism, he has been charged with the catch-all sin of "neo-romanticism." And the American scholar Sheldon Cheney decided to brand him with a greater sin, that of making his method of production more obtrusive than the theme and intention of the author: "When Max Reinhardt 'theatralizes' a play, he is likely to strain it out of all semblance to its original self," he said, and considered the *Oedipus Rex* to be a case in point – "startlingly effective, but hardly true to the spirit of the play."⁷ Ihering's dry comment on this production was, "When Reinhardt's chorus was let loose, it was unanimously reported that several maidservants screamed and went into hysterics."⁸

Above all, because he was an eclectic director, he was accused of having no style of his own. His critics have followed Ihering in believing that he left no style, only productions; no company, only actors; and no theatre, only performances – altogether, no tradition which might have become the basis for future work. Now, even if this were true, it would be more fair to suggest that the reason why Reinhardt left no style was because he believed it his task to explore each and every style. His demand for teamwork from every actor in

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every performance implied a complete submission to the play itself, and his perfectionist concern to identify the right way for each play was at bottom an effective policy of letting the drama speak for itself. This study of his work will therefore focus on the range of different kinds of drama to which he devoted his talents.

For if Reinhardt had a special *virtue*, it was surely his eclecticism. He was, indeed, arguably the most versatile director the theatre has seen. We may readily identify the particular contributions of André Antoine, Otto Brahm or Konstantin Stanislavsky to the growth of stage realism, of Gordon Craig, Vsevolod Meyerhold or Jean-Louis Barrault to the development of an impressionist and symbolist stage, or of Erwin Piscator or Bertolt Brecht to the invention of epic theatre, but within the range of styles which embrace simultaneous elements of realism, symbolism and expressionism in their appropriate mixture for each play, Reinhardt stands alone. Nor is this eclecticism a vice, a blemish on the body theatrical, since the twentieth-century theatre would not have wished it otherwise at a time when the true strength of the drama was perceived as an international and pluralistic force. Perhaps today only a director of the stature of Peter Brook can cross national frontiers as easily as Reinhardt did in his own time, and perhaps only artists of such stature can lay claim to ridding the theatre of its inherent provincialism.

At the beginning of the century it would have been a considerable disservice to the surging forces of the new drama had Reinhardt been other than he was. The revolutionary "independent" theatres of Paris, Berlin, London and Moscow had made their breach in the defences of the established commercial theatre in the West, and the Théâtre-Libre, the Freie Bühne, Grein's Independent Theatre in London and the Moscow Art Theatre had freed the stage for their own darlings: Ibsen, Strindberg, Hauptmann, Shaw, Chekhov. No serious repertory could subsequently ignore these masters. But the liberating efforts of these new theatres would have been of little account had no one followed in order to take advantage of the territory gained. As it happened, Reinhardt turned away from the sordid excesses of the naturalistic movement, with its narrowing vision of human society and individual weakness, together with the restrictive requirement that the new techniques of the realistic actor look minutely at human behaviour, but he did so because he could not deny the theatre or its players their natural urge towards imaginative self-expression. The success of Reinhardt's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the outset of his career in 1905 was doubtless due to its exuberant theatricality, its sense of life and colour after a period of drab realism.

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But this was not a retreat to the past, and he did not return to the ponderous and declamatory style of the nineteenth-century German stage. He showed that there could be a more supple, plastic, even natural approach to the performance of classical plays, not too unlike the flexibility that Brecht also called for a few years later when he also attacked the entrenched methods of the German stage.

Reinhardt's constant search for the right playhouse for each play was part of this impulse. We shall see that he learned from experience that the size and shape of the playhouse could control the purposes of the drama, and were essential considerations in every department of production. Over the years he made aesthetic distinctions between every kind of playhouse, in the beginning balancing the smaller Kleines Theater in the Unter den Linden against the larger Neues Theater on the Schiffbauerdamm, and shortly afterwards deliberately setting his little Kammerspiele against the larger Deutsches Theater. As he increasingly broke with the traditional limitations of the proscenium-arch theatre, he employed such vast arenas as the Circus Schumann in Berlin and Olympia in London, finally turning the Circus Schumann into his Grosses Schauspielhaus. But even this may be seen as a preparation for such outdoor work as he undertook in Salzburg's cathedral square or Florence's Boboli Gardens, or for the staging of *Faust* in Salzburg's Imperial Riding School or *The Merchant of Venice* on a Venetian canal. Within a generation he had tried out hitherto undreamed-of ways of putting on a play.

By refusing to close any avenues the theatre of the twentieth century might take, Reinhardt assisted and inspired a generation of new directors, designers and actors faced with the confusing mixture of stylistic choices open to Western theatre in the early years. For a generation the professional theatre of Europe and the United States turned to the record of his achievements in order to see what could be done, and what had been done, in the presentation of a particular play, or period, or genre, and speculated on what he would do next. For during his twenty-eight years of influence over the Berlin theatres, a period of constant innovation in production styles, of repeated testing of promising devices like spotlighting, the cyclorama and the revolving stage, Reinhardt was never far from the centre of experiment, and his total versatility made him the automatic recourse for those who wished to learn their business. Taking on the temporary job of assistant or of *Dramaturg* at the Deutsches Theater complex became something of a commonplace among youthful aspirants to a career in the theatre, and Reinhardt seemed never to refuse. As a result of his general policy and attitude towards the drama and the

profession, he contributed to another phenomenon: not only in Berlin, but everywhere, serious playgoers began to perceive the work of the director, the *régisseur*, as opposed to that of the actor, as the major object of interest.

Paris and Vienna had been the twin centres of the European theatre in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but since that time Paris had dictated the cultural trends and the terms of popular success for a century or more. It was the Austrian Max Reinhardt who made Berlin the new rival centre. The Deutsches Theater had been founded in 1884 to match the Comédie-Française in Paris and the Burgtheater in Vienna, and when Reinhardt took it over in 1905 it became the heart of an unrivalled complex of theatrical outlets large and small.

The statistical record may say something of his achievement. Where directors today hesitate about committing themselves to more than two or three productions a year, Reinhardt averaged almost twenty a year in his first twelve seasons as a director, with each play personally chosen, directed and supervised in minute detail. Nothing passed him by, from the design of the scenery to the planning of the printed programme. He worked himself harder than any of his subordinates, and his pace did not slacken during the war years, nor immediately after – his annual rate of production actually peaked at forty-eight in the season of 1916–17, in the middle of the First World War. The *Centennial Festschrift* published by the State University of New York at Binghamton in 1973 counted some 452 plays performed on 23,374 occasions between 1905 and 1930,⁹ and in all Reinhardt was responsible for well over 500 new productions (see appendix). In another kind of count, he also demonstrated his skill as a theatre business manager by operating over thirty different theatres and companies in his lifetime.¹⁰

In the service of world drama, he did not close his mind. There was, indeed, hardly a period or genre of drama, the work of hardly a major playwright, that he did not embrace and master, from Greek tragedy and comedy, to medieval and Renaissance drama (notably Shakespeare and Calderón), to the court comedies of Molière and Goldoni, to the German classics of Goethe and Schiller and the naturalistic plays of Ibsen, Shaw and Hauptmann. However, there was almost no Racine and very little Chekhov: here there seems to have been a blind spot; or perhaps Reinhardt considered these playwrights idiosyncratic enough to be left to their native stages. In the modern period, he devoted himself as much to the symbolism of the

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now discredited Maeterlinck and to the symbolist verse drama of Hugo von Hofmannsthal as to the early expressionism of Georg Büchner and Frank Wedekind, to the dream plays of Strindberg and the writers of the Young Germany movement. Thereafter he enthusiastically took up any new playwright in whom he saw talent: Pirandello, Kaiser, Toller, Schnitzler, Thornton Wilder.

He was overtaken in the general advance of the modern German theatre, as it happened, by his more politically committed juniors, Erwin Piscator and Bertolt Brecht. Both of these men owed some of their training in the theatre to the time each spent as a Reinhardt *Dramaturg* in the Deutsches Theater, but unlike Reinhardt they shared a theatrical ethic appropriate to a less middle-class, more politically conscious, audience. Piscator was a Marxist who made it clear from the beginning that his intentions as a director were politically radical, and his productions were planned to raise issues for public discussion and to arouse public feeling against social injustice. As both playwright and director, Brecht also saw himself in a political role. *Drums in the Night*, his prize-winning second play, which Reinhardt watched in rehearsal and had put on in the Deutsches Theater after it had first been produced in Munich in 1922, was frankly political, telling the story of a prisoner of war back in Berlin at the time of the ex-servicemen's "Spartacist" uprising after the Armistice. In Brecht's later plays the social and political criticism was built into the structure of his drama, and increasingly dictated his actual methods of presentation and performance. It was understandable that, at a time of acute economic crisis for the Weimar Republic, the work of such committed younger men should eventually draw attention away from a more politically complacent Reinhardt.

Although Reinhardt was never a political animal, there were some few occasions when Reinhardt the artist found himself caught up in a politicized situation not of his own making. Before the First World War, Georg Fuchs, founder of the Munich Künstler Theater, wrote a Passion play and proposed that Reinhardt be invited to Potsdam, the old imperial residence not far from Berlin, in order to direct it. The proposal was promptly rejected, since, although Reinhardt was still only a young man working to build his reputation at the time, the Kaiser could not forgive his earlier connection with Otto Brahm's production of Hauptmann's *The Weavers*, the work that the Kaiser considered to be "dangerous socialistic propaganda."¹¹ Of more importance, when war broke out in 1914 Reinhardt shared the widespread sense of a new national unity in Germany, and no doubt also felt what many took to be Germany's patriotic mission to restore the

world to spiritual health; at all events, together with ninety-two academics, artists and writers, he signed the famous manifesto of 1914 pledging support for the national war effort.

During the war itself, as we shall see, he lent his theatre, as well as his authority, to the aspiring young playwrights who formed the society of *Das junge Deutschland* (Young Germany). These writers wrote expressionist "mission" drama, partly expressing their youthful individualism and idealism in the face of an authoritarian and conservative society, partly protesting the inequalities of sacrifice during the war. But we may agree with Ludwig Marcuse that "expressionist drama was only really political when it stopped being expressionistic and became propaganda."¹² At all events, Reinhardt soon dropped them, and after Georg Kaiser's *From Morn to Midnight* (1919) and Ernst Toller's *The Machine Wreckers* (1922), produced in the Grosses Schauspielhaus with Karl Heinz Martin directing, he had nothing to do with their more politically oriented work of the 1920s. When the Nazi party came to power, expressionist drama was banned outright as decadent and dangerous, and Reinhardt's theatres in Berlin were confiscated by the government. On 16 June 1933 he could do no more than write an ineffectual open letter of protest to Goering and Goebbels.

It is hard, nevertheless, to resist the impression that Reinhardt's eclecticism was held against him. As early as 1914 Sheldon Cheney was at once commending his "prodigious energy" and qualifying his praise by suggesting that Reinhardt "worked too fast to be the deep thinker and original creator that Craig is."¹³ This was Edward Gordon Craig, the English actor and stage designer, whose record of practical work in the theatre was scanty by comparison. It is for us to balance against any such charge of shallowness Reinhardt's intense imaginative receptivity, to which everything theatrical was an unknown entity until tried out on the stage.

As a practical man of the theatre, Reinhardt appeared to know what he wanted instinctively, and his fellow artists came to trust his judgments. His talent contributed to the modern idea of the theatre director as a creative artist, a person capable of making final aesthetic decisions, and his work alone confirmed the possibility of having the single controlling intelligence that Craig pleaded for. It has been generally suggested that it was the nice combination of German discipline and Viennese sensitivity and humour which provided the right mixture for successful play production, but it is impossible to account for two other ingredients: his dramatic curiosity and his rare theatrical vision. For Reinhardt had the gift of dramatic perception, of

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recognizing exactly the right amalgam of the theatrical arts needed for a play – a capacity beyond literacy.

Reinhardt was a theatre man of so wide a range of relevant interests and skills that there is scarcely an area in which his touch was not felt. Alfred Brooks, first director of the Reinhardt Archive in Binghamton, believes that those in his debt included writers, critics, painters, designers, architects, composers, dancers, actors, directors and managers¹⁴ – just about every worker in the theatre. He was ready to experiment with all forms of staging, from that of the intimate studio theatre to that of the vast arena, and with every dramatic form from intense realism to high stylization, so that his influence was felt everywhere in the West. As a result of contact with Reinhardt's work, Piscator in Berlin was quick to pursue new ways of staging and mixing the arts of the theatre, as were Harley Granville-Barker in London and Kenneth Macgowan, Robert Edmond Jones and Lee Simonson in New York.

For it had not been long before the German-speaking Berlin–Vienna axis of his work took in other parts of the old Austro–Hungarian empire, notably Prague and Budapest. By 1911 Reinhardt's empire included Stockholm and St Petersburg, and by 1912 he had invaded London and New York. His artistic and administrative abilities contributed substantially to the twentieth-century concept of drama as a world language, and to our sense that today the theatre is common property, ready to take its proper place alongside the non-verbal arts of painting and music.

However, unlike Stanislavsky and unlike Brecht, Reinhardt was a man of few words, whether in speaking or writing. He always had a strong disinclination to theorize about what he was doing. Instead, he let his work speak for him. "No one could be a better listener," wrote Hermann Bahr, "but he himself was a silent man."¹⁵ Yet if he rarely committed himself in words, he believed in the immortality of the theatre and its power to offer its audiences an experience which could counter the emotional poverty of modern society. His belief in the theatre smacked a little of the evangelist, and was predicated on the need for community ritual. After the aimless years of much of nineteenth-century theatre, Reinhardt's legacy was to promote the ancient purposes of the drama – its shared expansion of feeling and understanding, its power to enlarge the imagination and intelligence, its gift of a special kind of delight to our lives.

Because Reinhardt made a great deal of money out of his many enterprises, some may consider his success to be more commercial than artistic. While it is true that he found the secret to satisfying the

steady demand of big, middle-class, metropolitan audiences for sensation and excitement, as well as their constant desire for novelty, it is not enough to leave the matter there. The German tradition of theatre, especially in the Catholic south and west and in Austria, was always one of a spectacular religious drama which stemmed from the communal miracle and Passion plays of the sixteenth century, and Reinhardt's career in the theatre, even in sophisticated Berlin, repeatedly reminds us of a heritage he could not wholly reject, even had he wished to. When he eventually returned to Salzburg in order to initiate its outstanding series of festivals, choosing Hofmannsthal's version of *Everyman* for its simple strength and its universality of meaning and appeal, his action reflected an inborn sense of the larger purpose of the theatre as a community ritual. Nor from another point of view is this sense far removed from Reinhardt's more technical search over the years for a special actor–audience intimacy and rapport, whether by scale in his little *Kammerspiele*, or by the use of a thrust stage in his *Grosses Schauspielhaus*, its auditorium the size of a circus. Nor is it far removed from his search for a free and fluid style of performance, one in which the actor himself was the focus of attention and had charge of the house.

Roy Pascal has suggested that, after the challenging avant-garde plays of Brahm's *Freie Bühne* had undermined the work of the German court theatres, which had been the traditional source of light theatrical entertainment, the commercial theatre itself began to feel something of their cultural mission, and that Reinhardt sought to consolidate the new audience into a "*Gemeinde*," a devoted community.¹⁶ Cultivating your audience has been the never-ending determination of every company and manager since the theatre went commercial in the Renaissance, and Reinhardt was certainly a master-builder of audiences. The period before the First World War, when he was establishing his theatres in Berlin, is also marked by the development of new theatre periodicals. Christian Morgenstern's *Das Theater* became Reinhardt's house-journal for his two theatres, the *Kleines Theater* and the *Neues Theater*, in 1904; 1911 saw the publication of his own *Blätter des Deutschen Theaters*, edited by Felix Hollaender and Arthur Kahane; and arts supplements began to appear regularly in the newspapers, airing every new cultural topic. All this is evidence of the acquisition of a new role in society for the Berlin theatre, one which fell into a decline only when the Nazis came to power and Reinhardt retreated into Austria. As the earlier spirit of the theatre's cultural mission evaporated, the *Grosses Schauspielhaus* slid into the presentation of operettas and spectacular revues,

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and the government developed the theatre as its own medium for propaganda, even putting on open-air productions for the mass audiences that might have been Reinhardt's.

From the beginning of his career, Reinhardt's catholicity was apparent. In his first two years as a director (1902–3), cabaret sketches were mixed with the quasi-expressionism of early Strindberg and Wedekind, while the uncompromising naturalism of Gorky's *The Lower Depths* rubbed shoulders with rarefied plays like Wilde's *Salomé* and Maeterlinck's *Pelléas and Mélisande*, both prime pieces of the new symbolist drama. Reinhardt was no doubt juggling too many balls together, and it would be generous to suggest that he was searching for a set of principles. It is probably more true to say that he was responding with the eagerness of youth to the unusual variety of different kinds of play which any new director would have faced in the early years of the century. It was a time when the theatre in the West experienced a confluence of aesthetic forces, a time of great ferment and excitement, and it was Reinhardt's contribution to bring naturalism, symbolism and expressionism together and explore their possibilities. After Granville-Barker saw him in Berlin in 1910, he wrote to *The Times*, "One thing above all, the German Theatre has vitality; and vitality covers a multitude of artistic sins."¹⁷ If there was a guiding principle among the few principles Reinhardt allowed himself, it was that "there is no one form of theatre which is the only true artistic form."¹⁸

In 1900, the year of Reinhardt's first attempt at production, the state of Western theatre was one of confusion of purpose and conflict of theory. The naturalistic movement, marked by Zola's *Thérèse Raquin* in 1867 and Ibsen's first play of social realism, *The Pillars of Society*, in 1877, was already past its peak. It had produced the kind of play which consciously rebelled against the popular romantic drama of the time, and the stage was now feeling a sense of release from the strait-jacket of strong emotions and moral sentiments, with its stereotypes of character, its declamatory speech and gesture, and an emblematic costume and setting. The naturalistic attack on the stagecraft of the commercial theatre, with the demands of the stock companies and the star system, served more than its own ends.

In matters of staging, the celebrated Saxe-Meiningen company had simultaneously shown Europe some of the possibilities of a more realistic stage image. From the Meiningen productions, developed under the control of one man, we also see the beginnings of the modern *régisseur*, a director who could co-ordinate every artistic detail of