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Excerpt

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I. *Introduction*

As a cultural institution the German stage suffers from the same malaise of rising prices and falling audiences as the theatre elsewhere. But it has an intellectual vitality and imaginative force that continues to give it significant social influence of a kind that recent English and American drama has only achieved in such isolated instances as Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* or Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. German dramatists become centres of public controversy, premières of Dürrenmatt and Hochhuth have attracted press conferences, performances Dorst, Weiss and Kroetz have provoked riots and public demonstrations, while the work of a writer like Wallraff is reported in the news columns of the daily press rather than the book review sections, and the influence of Brecht could be said to have set the tone and standard for much of modern drama in a way comparable to Ibsen fifty years earlier. Partly this importance comes from the traditional German view of the stage as a 'moral tribunal', a political forum – and if one were cynical it might be possible to put the status of German theatre down to a national failing, as indeed Friedrich Wolf has (extending Marx's comment that in politics 'the Germans have *thought* what others have done'): 'We have not translated our political passions and perceptions into deeds, rather we diverted them into the realm of the intellect and the theatre.'¹ Certainly the German playwright can count on a national enthusiasm for drama and the arts which immediately after the war put plays and music above comfort and even at times personal security, and which has since led to a massive public investment in rebuilding theatres and concert halls. Carl Ebert, for instance, touring Germany for the Allied Control Commission in 1945, reported packed audiences standing for over two hours in freezing cold in a ruined stock exchange or in the windowless auditorium of Frankfurt university to hear musical recitals, while the critic Friedrich Luft has given a graphic account of what Berlin theatre-goers risked to attend performances. Crossing the city to the reopening of the Deutsches Theater he had to clamber over a canal on two unsafe conduits, had to run from looters, and on his way home was knocked unconscious and robbed: 'It was the next day before my family saw me again and they had just about

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written me off, imagining that I could even be on my way to Siberia. Theatre-going was dangerous.’² If pre-formed public support or an escapist tendency to substitute art for life explained the prominence given to German playwrights, their work would be only of limited or academic interest. But the real reasons for their position relate to the choice of material, the exploration of new techniques of presentation, the consistent attempt to develop styles to express contemporary modes of perception – and these stake a claim for wide attention to their work, in particular to its dramatic form.

Even on a basic level of subject-matter German drama can be seen as seminal since the German experience of total war, communal guilt feelings, the student riots of the 1960s and the pressures of urban terrorism in the 1970s mirrors English and American experiences in a more extreme form. Where we have a general awareness of the cold war and the social problems caused by prosperity (the ‘you never had it so good’ syndrome) – in Germany, the Berlin wall and the scale of the transformation from ruins to a dominating industrial position within a single decade have intensified the political and economic stresses on contemporary society, putting the disruptive effects of a nation divided against itself, the reaction against purely materialistic values, or the strains of accelerated social change in a sharp perspective where the fundamental issues appear clear-cut. The themes in which these issues are embodied may seem at first glance to have a limited and specifically German relevance. Auschwitz is not our guilt, the short-lived Bavarian communist republic of 1919 or the events of 17 June 1953 are not our history. On looking closer we find that these concentration camps or revolutionary situations are not the subjects of the plays but symbols, examples through which general questions can be analysed: the nature of capitalism; whether personal responsibility can exist in a context where the individual is powerless; the function of art and its relationship to effective political action. Indeed a striking characteristic of recent German drama is the way the issues that arise from specifically national experience are translated into global terms – Vietnam, Cuba, or Dürrenmatt’s paradigmatic model countries – even to the extent that the details are too alien for the immediate audience to understand and the meaning becomes so generalised that special techniques are required if German spectators are to apply the points to their own context.

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More important in its implications for modern drama as a whole is the way German artists have been forced to confront aesthetic issues by the extreme nature of wide-spread social problems. With these problems being seen as of immediate and overwhelming relevance playwrights have had to try to deal with them directly, which has meant formulating new methods of representation. In this they have been following the lead of Brecht whose starting point a generation earlier was the conviction that

Just the grasping of a new range of material requires a new dramatic and theatrical form. Can we speak about finance in heroic couplets? . . . Petroleum struggles against the five act form . . . The dramatic technique of Hebbel and Ibsen is totally insufficient to dramatise even a simple press release . . .

. . . Indeed one no longer dares to offer [drama] in its old form to grown-up newspaper readers.³

So the postwar stylistic concern as such was hardly new to German theatre. In the 1920s Brecht had remarked (unfavourably) on the 'Babylonian confusion' of styles, a point echoed – but as a positive value – in the sixties by Dürrenmatt, who commented that the eclectic borrowing of stylistic elements from every conceivable theatrical period made the playwright aware of 'all the potentialities of theatre, opens the theatre of our time to all experiments'.⁴ Indeed, practically the only approach not evident in serious German drama of the last twenty years is the conventional naturalistic form. With the possible exception of Walser's *Home Front* (*Die Zimmerschlacht*, 1967) which is closely modelled on Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, work like Terence Rattigan's well-made problem plays, or Tennessee Williams' 'corn-pone melodrama' are no longer viable on the German stage as vehicles for addressing significant contemporary issues.

On a general level the kind of themes that seem to require stylistic experiment could even be called traditional to German drama. The radical challenge to social structures in much of documentary theatre, for example, can be traced back to revolutionary plays of bourgeois emancipation like Schiller's *The Robbers* (*Die Räuber*, 1781). Already in Büchner there is the same questioning of the point at which revolution becomes repression in the name of freedom and the same tragic conflict between ideology and humanity as in Brecht's 'teaching play' from the 1930s, *The Measures Taken* (*Die Massnahme*), or in Weiss' *Marat/Sade* and Dorst's *Toller*. The equation between extending

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the range of subjects open to the theatre and stylistic innovation may be a familiar one; what is new in the voice of postwar German drama is the attempt to develop a specifically contemporary stage vocabulary. At the turn of the century the misery and poverty of Silesian weavers could be represented by Hauptmann's amalgamation of Greek choric effects with the new naturalistic form that expressed the environmental determinism, the social perception of the time. Today a similar treatment – Wesker's working-class trilogy or O'Neill's version of *The Lower Depths* – seems dated. It may be exciting as theatrical entertainment, but it does not correspond to our perception; and in their attempts to portray social deprivation, to rouse public opinion by showing the social causes of exploitation and its individual effects in contemporary terms, German dramatists have explored different possibilities. At one end of the spectrum is a new version of the 'folk play', adapting its traditional ironic ambiguity to present apparently simple situations from multiple viewpoints, and extending its oblique presentation of social analysis in a linguistic form to the point where the quality of the characters' speech makes overt commentary unnecessary. At the other is a complex adaptation of 'the happening', where actual events and situations are structured so that those involved become aware of the true political nature of what they usually accept unconsciously – an integration of performance and reality which moves outside any normal definition of theatre.

Because of the pressure of twentieth-century social changes in the German context which has magnified and exacerbated them, the German artist has been forced to respond to the challenge of Hegel, who concluded in his analysis of history that the era of art was at an end; of Adorno, who stated that poetry, the creative imagination, could only be seen as illusory escapism in light of Auschwitz and was therefore impossible to justify. The effect has been a search for new forms and a decisive break with the conventional dramatic approach, which remained basically unchanged from Lessing's *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* of 1768 to Lukács (who in 1909 could still state that 'modern drama is the drama of the bourgeoisie', based on a particular definition of individuality and 'historical consciousness')⁵ and which still essentially holds the Broadway and West End stages today. To some extent this stylistic search, the concern for modernity and the sensitivity to changes in perception, is as traditional to German

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theatre as its characteristic themes. Hofmannsthal had noted it in 1926, expressing a widespread feeling that the concept of individuality, created by the Renaissance and reaching its fullest form in the nineteenth century, was basically responsible for the catastrophe of the First World War, and that: 'I would even go so far as to say that all the ominous events in Europe which we have experienced in the last twelve years are nothing else but a very circumstantial way of burying the life-weary concept of the European individual in the grave that it has dug for itself',⁶ – a viewpoint that forms the theme of Handke's most recent plays. In the 1920s this revolution in consciousness lay behind expressionism, Brecht's epic theatre and Piscator's experiments with a multi-media, mechanised stage. In the postwar period it has produced documentary and 'dialectical' theatre forms, the new 'folk play' and Handke's linguistic drama. On one level all these theatrical approaches have their roots in the 1920s and 1930s, particularly the 'folk play', which derives from Horváth, and the documentary, which can be seen as realising the aims of the '*neue Sachlichkeit*' (new objectivity) movement – the qualities of which were summed up in 1928 in terms accurately describing the documentary drama of forty years later:

The term '*Sachlichkeit*' is no longer . . . a simple translation of the term 'Realism'. It signifies: the object itself replaces the work of art: the thing itself, life itself, the authentic subject. . . In the theatre? It means the direct presentation of contemporary life and its forces, not humanised; without artistic structuring and harmonising. . . [A 'problematic' age needs] direct theatre; theatre of statement and actuality.⁷

In fact it is arguable that without this prewar background contemporary German dramatists would have been unlikely to reach their high level of formal achievement. However, with the complete break in artistic continuity represented by the twelve years of fascist rule they were forced to formulate their own approaches, and the distinctive postwar styles are therefore more radical, based more on contemporary experience than on examples from the past.

Experiments with form then are not simply arbitrary or personal choices, for novelty as such is self-defeating and conventions only communicate effectively when they are accepted as natural and therefore unnoticed. This, for instance, is one of the basic flaws in expressionism: the means of expression that theoretically

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transmit immediate experience on a subliminal level in fact obtrude because they are based on a too simplistic equation between the artist's personal imagery and the symbols common to the public at large, with the result that the means attract our attention at the expense of the meaning they are intended to express. So innovations are only valid (even by the very basic test of stage-worthiness) when they correspond to the audience's perception of life, and might be said to be most effective when they give meaningful shape to perceptions which have been widely accepted without being fully recognised. As a generally accepted view, this explains German dramatists' at first sight paradoxical rejection of the 'avant-garde' label as 'conservative'. To be avant-garde is 'apolitical' in the sense that style which lacks any social correlative cannot heighten or change the audience's awareness.⁸ To another generation, of course, much of what is most contemporary in German drama may seem as dated as those characteristic styles of the 1920s, expressionism, futurism, vorticism, do to us. Which theatrical forms will survive? It is still too early to say, but what is of immediate interest is the way these new styles reflect or formulate modern experience, adapting the theatre to suit new social conditions, making it capable of handling new subject matter.

Literary and dramaturgical criteria (whatever the claims of critics) are at best relative. If the actor's name, as Garrick remarked, is written on water, the same is true of theatrical values which depend on changing public expectations, technical or philosophical advances, even fads. But there are certain basic questions that any study such as this must attempt to answer, at least provisionally. One is the relationship between form and content. Another is the way the difference in effect between various styles can be defined, for which one needs to determine how to treat that amorphous abstraction, the audience. Equally, it is a mistake to assume that a particular range of subject-matter limits the exploration of theatre as an art form, or that political commitment rules out stylistic advances – an all too common view in the light of British or American experience and one argued, for instance, by Marowitz, who has claimed that

contemporary theatre in Germany is fixated on politics, while the important developments in theatre today are occurring elsewhere. The most advanced phenomena are neither literary nor political, but formal. If the middle of the twentieth century is going to be remembered, it will

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be for the ensembles of the Living Theatre, the Open Theatre, Café La Mama and Grotowski, whose common factor is a physical, unnaturalistic theatre-language, spiritually revolutionary and standing in opposition to . . . psychological realism, Aristotelian time-structure.⁹

It is certainly true that every significant contemporary German dramatist, apart from Bernhard and possibly Dorst, must be counted as politically committed. Grass and Kroetz have fought elections, for the socialists and communists respectively; Hacks, Wallraff and Weiss are professed Marxists; even Dürrenmatt's anti-ideological stance is a highly political protest. But none write in a 'realistic' mode, whether psychological or social, and as we shall see the nearer their plays approach documentary fact the more aesthetic or purely formal structures are emphasised. Not only has a fairly narrow and intense political spectrum produced a wide variety of styles, but (with the exception of the rather suspect Brechtian assertion that epic techniques embody dialectical materialism) there is no discernible link between particular styles and political principles.

Equally it is all too easy to talk about style as if it were something separable, applied independently, and Dürrenmatt has given a neat example of how a dramatist might treat the same subject – Scott's death in the Antarctic – in different ways. As a tragedy in the Shakespearean mould, where the pride of the protagonist leads him to attempt the impossible and the jealousy or treachery of members of the expedition is responsible for the catastrophe: from the epic perspective (on analogy to the changes Brecht made in his adaptation of *Coriolanus*) where Scott is presented as a product of his society, so that 'class thinking' caused him to buy ponies instead of the more efficient dogs, and the disaster illustrates the evils of a particular social structure: as an existential symbol *à la* Beckett, with Scott and his companions as blocks of ice carrying on echoing, isolated monologues: or as a paradoxical farce in which Scott comes to be 'shut in a cold-store by mistake while buying the necessary food-supplies for the expedition', freezing to death with an incongruous heroism.¹⁰ The McLuhanesque medium-equals-message formula is an oversimplification. As Walser has put it, representational forms 'have to be such that they do not simplify what is complex, and so that the means is not taken for the thing itself'.¹¹ But even Dürrenmatt's deliberately facetious flight of imagination indicates the way stylistic choices define subject matter. The starting point may be the same, the

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statement is not. A style then represents a perspective, and changes in theatrical convention should express new criteria for defining reality. Conversely, any theatre-goer associates certain forms of presentation with particular types of dramatic experience, so that a play's style has to be appropriate to the author's intention in the sense that it keys in the desired range of expectations.

The minimal requirements, then, for evaluating style are coherence and contemporaneity: that there is a harmony between the theme and its treatment, and that the approach provides a perspective in which the modern world becomes more comprehensible. This is not to say, however, that there is such a thing as a specific 'modern' style. The limitations of such an assumption can be seen in certain German critics who claim that only the 'comic' approach or 'open' dramatic forms are valid because these correspond to 'democratisation', represent the mobility of industrial society or 'emancipate the audience'.¹² Rather than any direct analogy between social and dramatic structures, new conventions would seem to be developed by taking elements from previously discarded or foreign theatre forms, as Brecht borrowed from Elizabethan and Chinese drama or as the modern documentary play is based on Piscator's early, partially-unsuccessful experiments. The modernity lies in the way stylistic elements are altered by being used in unusual combinations or gain fresh significance in the context of untraditional dramatic material. In one sense there is no such thing as a 'new' theatrical element – the revolutionary innovations have come from social changes, architectural or technological advances that occurred independent of the stage – and the basic difference between theatrical styles comes from the relative weighting of mimesis and abstraction.

As for the audience, on whom the effectiveness of any particular approach depends, generalisations are bound to be inaccurate. Not only can the composition of different audiences significantly alter the apparent meaning of a play, but any major public event can give a play a totally unintended reference or remove its immediate relevance, causing completely different but equally legitimate responses on different dates.¹³ From Aristotle's discussion of catharsis to Brecht, all drama theory has been based on the spectator, and even the apparently purely formal concerns of the neo-classicists (such as the unities or the use of heroic couplets) are in fact means of heightening the intensity of response on a specific, elevated emotional level. Thus techniques of representa-

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tion are at bottom justified by the kind and degree of audience participation; and it is this that really distinguishes different dramatic forms, defining classical tragedy (emotional sublimation, evoking pity and fear as a form of psychiatric purgation) or traditional satire (focussing peer-group pressure through ridicule, 'vicious people' in Congreve's model being shamed by the laughter of others who are 'both warned and diverted at their expense') or contemporary epic drama (rational perception and objective judgement, creating 'a theatre full of experts' by enforcing 'a smoking-observing attitude'). As Handke has put it, plays have only a putative existence without a public, and 'therefore need a *vis à vis*. At least *one* person who listens.'¹⁴ The problem is to determine exactly what an audience's reactions might or should be. Here external evidence can be drawn on, reports of specific public responses or personal evaluations; but only to indicate the range of possibilities. Since conditions outside the theatre and quite unrelated to the play can change its effect, all that such evidence can define is a variable. In addition, where there have been clearly defined reactions such as the occupation of the stage by the audience, a street demonstration, vocal expressions of disappointment or approval, these may be due to a homogeneous but unrepresentative group within the audience, such as members of a student organisation, or to the playwright's reputation rather than the performance itself, as in demonstrations *before* the opening of Kroetz's plays or the rejection of Hochhuth's second play simply because of the unrealistic expectations generated by his first. Similarly, a professional critic's opinion may not reflect the general public's, and the gap is indicated by the performance/spectator ratio. In 1968–9, for example, there were 508 performances of Handke's highly praised *Kaspar*, while Miller's *The Price*, which critics generally disparaged as conventional, was given 418 German performances in the same season – yet only 54,868 people saw *Kaspar* as compared to the enthusiastic 154,348 who went to the Miller play. It would seem appropriate then to treat the audience as neither a collection of independent individuals nor an anonymous and unified totality, but as a socially variable group whose reactions are the sum of personal responses, these being to some extent conditioned by those around them.

This leads to a third problem area, performance. A play only reaches its full expression on the stage, but obviously each

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production is a different interpretation and a director can materially alter the dramatist's intended effect by imposing his own style. Where the differences in production are marked, however, it is frequently a sign that the original stylistic concept of the play is unsatisfactory, as with Handke's *They Are Dying Out* (*Die Unvernünftigen sterben aus*, 1974) which was played in Düsseldorf as a realistic analysis of a monomaniac, demonstrating the psychological effects of capitalism, as a slapstick farce performed by clowns in Zürich and as a Daliesque, surrealist dream in Frankfurt. An even more extreme example is Hochhuth's *The Representative* (US title: *The Deputy*/*Der Stellvertreter*, 1963). With its controversial theme and momentous subject it was a play that no major theatre could ignore, but the monumental length of the text with its weight of unassimilated factual detail meant that it was unperformable without radical cutting. There is also an uneasy jumble of styles in its various scenes ranging from vulgar naturalism, through static argument between embodiments of moral principles rather than individualised characters, to symbolic monologues; and the different attempts to resolve the stylistic conflict together with a wide range of cuts produced essentially different plays. In the Bern production, for instance, *The Representative* became a symbolic passion-play. Almost all historical references, facts and statistics were omitted and it was staged in an abstract setting of six plain white, moveable screens with symbols marking each scene – immense antlers for the *Jägerkeller*, a barbed-wire cross for Auschwitz – while the order of episodes was changed to create parallels between the Nuncio's moral abdication and the vacuous materialism of the Nazi revellers, between the Pope's betrayal of humanity and the daemonic nihilism of the Doctor, so that the action was one of redemptive sacrifice and the guilt universal. By contrast, in Düsseldorf the play became a Brechtian parable, with a bare stage, visible machinery and lights. Placards announced time and place, while the cuts gave a typically 'epic' focus by turning the positive moral position of Riccardo and Gerstein into a short-sighted error – the Church being a political institution and religion a form of propaganda, it is simply unrealistic to expect ethical action. Other interpretations varied from a neo-classical drama of ideas in which all Nazi figures and the concentration-camp scenes were cut, the conflict was purely intellectual, and the play ended with a monologue put together from Riccardo's final speeches of self-justification