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0521583403 - German Expressionist Theatre: The Actor and the Stage

David F. Kuhns

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Introduction

The late Wilhelmine and Weimar eras are notable for the fascination they continue to hold for historians of art, literature and, particularly, the theatre. One reason for this is the distinct relationship between forces of socio-political change and revolutions in aesthetic philosophy and artistic form moving through these periods. From the turn of the century until the outbreak of world war a spirit of artistic revolution waxes in German culture. The general result thereafter is that the arts – again, notably the theatre – are prepared as never before in German history to articulate the experience of historical change. German society – particularly from the end of the war through the brief “revolutionary” period, 1918–19 – is in such a state of turmoil that one can accurately speak both of a culture in transformation and of a crucial role for the arts in the process.

Among various artistic strategies active in this historical situation Expressionism was the most prominent. Yet the exact nature and specific features of this new and undeniable “movement” in the arts eluded definition. The artists who acknowledged and embraced it debated its aesthetics and struggled over its goals to such a degree that in the end it seemed, as one scholar has written, that there was “not one Expressionism but a number of loosely connected and subtly – or not so subtly – differentiated Expressionisms.”¹ Yet notwithstanding the marked divergence of its stylistic modes, ranging from primitivist emotionalism to abstract geometrism, the Expressionist movement was decisively about cultural transformation. In social consciousness and ethical commitment, as well as artistic form and aesthetic philosophy, Expressionism sought to revolutionize German society and renew its faith in humanity.

No where was this more evident than in the theatre. However, most subsequent scholarly attention has focused on the plays and relatively little on their performance. The present study assumes, by

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contrast, that the historical significance – that is, the formative connections between a mode of dramatic art and its cultural moment – can best be concretized in production research. It is in the production of a script, after all – in the concrete matrix of resources and initiatives shaping the work of directors, actors, designers, and critics – that the play’s historical materiality begins to come clear. In the case of Expressionism, in particular, I shall argue that the cooperative efforts of the productions’ artists converged definitively on the body and voice of the actor. What distinguishes Expressionist performance in the history of the early Modernist avant-garde is the degree and manner in which the process of cultural transformation was inscribed in the body of the actor itself and thereby performed on stage. What distinguishes the theatre of Expressionism, in other words, is the extent to which it “textualized” actors. Radically suppressing their traditional mimetic function, Expressionist productions foregrounded actors’ bodies and voices as complex thematic stage signs. In this way, audiences were virtually impelled to “read” the performance as an Expressionist text about, rather than a mimetic imitation of, the contemporary state of German culture.

Central to the argument of this text was the issue of expressive power itself. For this reason it is important to stress from the outset that this book is about a kind of “performing” whose standards and challenges were markedly different than those associated with traditional mimetic or rhetorical notions of stage acting. The distinction is necessary for an understanding of what it was that theatrical Expressionism attempted to accomplish in its conception and use of the stage actor. The Expressionist strategy in the theatre for coming to terms with the crises of contemporary German history was to anthropomorphize them abstractly in the body and voice of the actor. The basic assumption was that to give history expressive form in such a way was to acquire some measure of influence over the course of historical events. Clearly such an ambitious undertaking went well beyond traditional ideas of acting as either realistic impersonation or declamation. Rather, what the Expressionist actor sought to demonstrate, to textualize, was the historical power of “expression” itself. To this idea of acting I shall apply the term “performance.” Thereby, I mean to denote a kind of stage art that foregrounds the performer’s expressive powers as capable of “performing,” bringing about directly, some effect in real life. The Futurists and the Dadaists, of course, experimented with something like this idea of performance;

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but the real effects of the stage events they performed were limited to sensationalist sensory stimulation or expressions of cultural protest. What distinguishes Expressionist performance from practices such as these was that the efficacy it sought was nothing less than the regeneration of German society as a whole.

Whether they have privileged aesthetic form or psychological credibility, technique or inspiration, theories of acting from ancient times to the modern era have generally assumed some sort of social, moral, and/or spiritual public influence as a consequence of the actor's art. In this context, the view of acting as a species of rhetorical art – the dominant view until the end of the nineteenth century – conceives of this influence as a direct affective impact on an audience. The principal alternative conception – arising in the mid eighteenth century and culminating in the tradition of Stanislavskian psychological realism – is that the actor's art affects an audience indirectly, as a by-product of its central effort to create a mimetic illusion of individual emotional experience. The sort of efficacy sought in Expressionist performance, ambitious though it was, must be understood in terms of the first tradition just mentioned, that of the rhetorical stage. I distinguish Expressionist “performance” from mimetic psychological acting chiefly in order to show the degree of Expressionism's faith in the power of rhetoric to reach beyond the theatrical frame and directly influence the ethical, social and political behavior of audiences.

However, when one realizes the centrality of the stage director in Expressionist production, it also becomes clear that the actor was not expected to shoulder the rhetorical burden of performance efficacy alone. A common feature of the various modes of theatrical Expressionism was the use of scenic design and lighting conceptions to shape the expressive work of the actor, whose performance in turn infused the stage environment with great energy. Hence, the present study is not simply about acting. Rather, it considers the ways in which the Expressionist actor functioned as the central dynamic force in a rhetorical totality that included all the visual and aural elements of the production. Expressionism's distinctive way of integrating acting, costuming, make-up, set design, lighting, and music rendered all of these elements “active” on stage. It was the Expressionist production's overall style, not just its human actors, that was expected to “perform” the desired rhetorical effect upon an audience.

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It is in this context that the following study examines the nature of German Expressionist performance in its several distinct modes. The period in question is 1916–21, during which Expressionism achieved the greatest clarity as a theatrical movement. Though the study takes an historical attitude, however, it is neither solely a factual reconstruction nor a social history of Expressionist performance. Rather, elements of both methods are employed in a hybrid approach which seeks to account for the fact that a variety of contemporaneous but clearly distinct performance modes were all termed “Expressionist” by their practitioners. Thus, while detailing the distinctions between these modes, I am also about the project of synthesizing them. What emerges is a conception of German theatrical Expressionism as a cohesive (if not always coherent) movement whose purpose was to influence performatively the historical process of transformation from late-Wilhelmine culture to a more ethically advanced, humanitarian society.

The eclecticism of my approach was necessitated by the particular paucity of available research resources. The primary source material for the study is of four basic types: reviews of Expressionist productions by contemporary newspaper critics or theatre historians; memoirs or statements by actors, directors, theorists, and reviewers; theoretical manifestoes written by Expressionist playwrights and aestheticians; and finally the language and stage directions of selected Expressionist scripts. None of these sources alone provides a complete account of the details of Expressionist performance. All of them, however, provide some valuable information which helps in describing the movement. These materials are generally available only in German and all translations are mine except where indicated in the text which introduces the quotation or in the accompanying reference citation.

Theoretical treatises – such as those of Felix Emmel, Kasimir Edschmid, Vassily Kandinsky and Lothar Schreyer – are important in that they articulate the aesthetic and social goals of theatrical Expressionism. However, like the language and stage directions of the plays, they are only a record of the expectations for, not necessarily the achievements of, the Expressionist stage. Neither type of primary resource provides the sense of practical experience in Expressionist performance which is afforded in the statements of the actors and directors. Unfortunately, such personal accounts by these artists themselves are scarce. Of those that I have been able to locate,

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only Fritz Kortner's lengthy autobiography affords any significant detail about what an actor experienced as he attempted to meet the demands of Expressionist staging. Kortner's Berlin career was launched on the Expressionist stage and he quickly became Expressionism's most renowned performer. But while that small portion of his memoir dealing with Expressionism is a valuable record of his own relationship to the movement, it is, after all, only one actor's statement. His observations about other actors, such as Albert Bassermann, and directors, such as Leopold Jessner, are clearly subjective. On the other hand, he generally attempts to convey both the strengths and the weaknesses of the artists with whom he was associated.

By far the most extended statement about Expressionist production by a director is that of Lothar Schreyer.² However, since Schreyer is known to have sacrificed strict historical accuracy, at times, for the sake of theoretical argument in his memoirs, his account is primarily valuable only as a theory of Expressionist performance, not as a reliable record of practical achievements. The problem here, it should be noted, is not one of systematic fabrication but rather of the inevitable distortions of recollection: the primary memoir, *Expressionistisches Theater* (1948), was written three decades after the period in which he worked at the Sturm-Bühne and the Kampfbühne. None of the other important Expressionist directors has left anything more than an isolated remark here or there, in an interview, a letter, or a program note, as to his *practical* methods or objectives. Nonetheless, I have taken such comments as are available to be significant evidence of directorial strategies – as, for example, where Jessner states that he sought to turn his actors into “transcendental sculptures.”

The newspaper reviews, one might imagine, move us a little closer to an objective description of Expressionist performance techniques. However, the rhetoric of the theatre critics, as much as that of the playwrights or theorists, reveals their own sense of cultural mission. Moreover, the reviews of the earlier Expressionist productions lack specificity. Typically, the acting is not described but rather evaluated in a general phrase or two at the end of the review after the critic has discussed the script at length. Even where descriptions of acting are most detailed, however – in the reviews of late Expressionist productions in Berlin from approximately 1918 to 1921 – the critic typically spends more time discussing the play than the production. In some

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cases, his objectivity is compromised by an evident positive or negative bias with regard to Expressionist aesthetics generally or to the particular style of “Expressionist” performance in the production being reviewed. Where the critic levels a harsh judgment it is often in the context of his distinction between genuine and counterfeit theatrical Expressionism.

Thus, in addition to what may be gleaned about Expressionist acting itself, the newspaper reviews are also valuable for the variety of conceptions of theatrical Expressionism which they reveal. Herein, however, lies the danger mentioned above: namely, the inevitable rhetorical skewing of the critic’s report. Hence, I have throughout the study sought to address the audience dimension of Expressionist performance specifically in terms of how audience response as well as the actors’ work on stage is constructed by the critics in their reviews. When any theatre reviewer critiques a production he or she inevitably constructs, implicitly if not explicitly, an audience response as well. Even the most individual critical reactions carry *ex officio* institutional authority in print; and every review, therefore, implicitly argues a certain definition of the community and what it requires of the theatre. Though such allowances obviously must be made in reading any account of a performance, past or present, they are especially significant in the case of Expressionist-era production reviews. This is because German theatre criticism at this time was practiced with a seriousness and sense of social responsibility both traditional, dating at least from the age of Schiller and Weimar classicism, and uniquely modern, reflecting the urgent contemporary sense of cultural crisis felt and articulated by many of the critics.

While the printed journalistic record is of great use, there exists little helpful photographic documentation of the varieties of Expressionist acting. The few publicity photos of famous Expressionist actors – such as Kortner, Werner Krauss, Ernst Deutsch, or Agnes Straub – and the handful of action stills which are extant pertain mostly to late Expressionist performance in Berlin. Also, like most production stills, their informative value is limited because they are obviously posed rather than taken spontaneously in the course of the action. I have been unable to find any visual record of acting in the earliest, provincial Expressionist productions; although some few pencil sketches of settings and their lighting effects, or of actor positions on stage, are available. At his Hamburg Kampfbühne theatre Schreyer would not even permit reviews of productions, let

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alone photographs of them. I have been able to locate a few stills of partial masks and puppet models used in his stagings. This is supplemented by graphic evidence in the form of sketches and complete color renderings of the full-sized body masks typically worn by his actors. Here a dominant costuming agenda appears to have transformed actors into walking abstract Expressionist paintings. However, these kinds of visual documentation – production stills, sketches drawn during performances, and mask renderings – finally shed no definitive light on what the actors actually did in performance. Therefore inclusion of such photos and illustrations as are available seemed to offer little advantage. Instead, I have chosen simply to describe the visual details of the various Expressionist performance modes on the basis of the more detailed kinds of evidence noted above, chiefly newspaper reviews and memoirs.

Another part of the visual record are the few extant Expressionist films. I have chosen to discuss the cinema version of Kaiser's *Von morgens bis mitternachts* and Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. Yet these films fail to capture the experience of live Expressionist performance which the newspaper reviews and artists' statements describe from either side of the footlights. An extended discussion of Expressionist cinema would reveal more about the art of the Expressionist director and film editor than it would about the work of the Expressionist stage actor. Also, I have omitted consideration of the so-called "Kammerspielfilm" of the 1920s which, in the style of the "New Objectivity" subsequent to Expressionism, typically depicts proletarian economic hardship and resultant moral depravity. Though such films make ample use of Expressionist atmosphere in the *mise-en-scène*, the acting is psychological and realistically understated – everything, in short, against which all modes of Expressionist performance were in rebellion.

Notwithstanding the cinema-like fluidity of space and time in some of them, the plays of the Expressionist era were written either for stage production or, in the case of Kandinsky, as theoretical exercises. The scripts which are given extended discussion in this study are those which seem most significant for the development of Expressionist performance. I have included, that is, those plays whose style of composition and/or production treatment most clearly defined distinct modes of performing. Thus, along with the famous productions of Expressionist plays or classic scripts – such as *Der Sohn* [*The Son*], *Der Bettler* [*The Beggar*], *Die Wandlung* [*Transfigura-*

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tion], *Masse Mensch* [*Man and the Masses*], Schiller's *Wilhelm Tell*, and Shakespeare's *Richard III* – less well known premières, such as those of Paul Kornfeld's *Die Verführung* [*The Seduction*] or the Sturm-Bühne production of Stramm's *Sancta Susanna*, are examined. On the other hand, well-received productions of dramas such as von Unruh's *Ein Geschlecht* [*One Race*] or Kaiser's *Gas* trilogy, to name only a few, are not considered. Though such plays marked important *thematic* consolidations or advances in the development of Expressionist dramatic art, they appear to have made no significant new performance demands beyond the established mode of intense character acting epitomized in Reinhardt's Deutsches Theater ensemble and the productions of *Das junge Deutschland*.

The question of theme in Expressionist drama, however, may have been significant for Expressionist acting because of social issues the plays failed to address. The typical functions of women in Expressionist scripts, for example, are conceived in blatantly sexist terms. In plays as distinct as Sorge's *Der Bettler* and Stramm's *Sancta Susanna*, women are figures of either inspiration or corruption, true to a Judeo-Christian literary tradition dating from the epochs of Biblical composition. Often they function simply as derivative spiritual factors in the central male figure's progress toward his vocation and destiny. In the few cases where they have an identity of their own – as, for example, in *Sancta Susanna* or Paul Kornfeld's *Die Verführung* – it is morally diabolical.³ Stramm's conception of the vicious principal female character in *Kräfte* [*Forces*] is nothing short of outright misogyny. Critics who reviewed Agnes Straub's portrayal of this figure characterized her performance in bestial terms and compared it to the animal-like, “demonic” acting of Gertrud Eysoldt in Wilde's *Salomé* (Kleines Theater, Berlin, 1902) and Tilla Durieux in Hebbel's *Judith* (Deutsches Theater, Berlin, 1910). In my analysis of the development of distinct modes of Expressionist performance, I shall have occasion to comment on the influence of sexism, both in the plays and in proto-Expressionist performance genres such as the cabaret. The sexist pattern is most evident in the darkly sensual spirituality which became characteristic of female performances in Expressionist theatre.

Where possible, I have consulted all four types of primary source material – reviews, memoirs, manifestoes, and scripts – in order to achieve as detailed and balanced an account of Expressionist performance as possible. Where specific historical evidence seems

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most reliable – chiefly in the reviews – I have used it as the foundation for inferential reconstruction of details which are missing. As a principal aid in this procedure, I have drawn upon the language and stage directions of the plays and the arguments of the theorists to help fill in the gaps. In some cases the preponderance, or the sole source, of available information is strictly subjective – Schreyer’s memoirs, for example, are virtually the only extended account of *Kampfbühne* Expressionist performance. Nevertheless, I have utilized such resources in the belief that subjective information – properly qualified as such, of course – is better than none at all. It at least reveals something of the aesthetic intention and thematic concerns which were likely to be influential in the development of performance methods, even though full factual details of those practices themselves might prove finally unrecoverable. My synthesis of primary sources is based on the conviction that the statements of theorists, the language and stage directions of the scripts, the practical work of the actors and directors, and the reactions of the critics all informed one another. The material from memoirs, of course, comes after the fact, and it undoubtedly suffers to some degree from the distortions of hindsight. Yet it does give some indication of how the actor, director, theorist, or critic may have contributed to the general climate of artistic experimentation which characterized the Expressionist era.

More than any programmatic quality, what gave theatrical Expressionism a degree of coherence as a movement was the loosely defined, sometimes contentious, theatrical community it created. Nonetheless, care must be taken, in the context of theatre history, when speaking of “the Expressionists.” This is a point about which many studies of Expressionism are careless. Strictly speaking, the movement’s programmatic dimension was most evident, as Roy Allen has amply demonstrated, in the various Expressionist literary circles organized in the pre- and post-war eras.⁴ Associated in a basic program of aesthetic and ethical principles, these writers’ fellowships met regularly in such informal venues as cafés or publishing offices to share the results of their often quite distinct practical working methods. Such literary Expressionists were nurtured by a relatively stable collective identity and community of support. But aside from Schreyer’s coterie theatre group, the *Kampfbühne* (itself a derivative of Herwarth Walden’s interdisciplinary Expressionist *Sturm* circle), and the short-lived *Das junge Deutschland* association at Reinhardt’s

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Deutsches Theater, Expressionism “moved” within the theatre in a much less concerted way.

Whereas Expressionist literary circles had been active since 1910, it was not until mid-way through the war – thanks to the pioneering efforts of some of the provincial theatres – that Expressionist drama began to appear on stage. While some dramatists worked in connection with the literary circles, the majority of contributors in these programmatic associations were lyric poets whose principal subject was the cultural bankruptcy of contemporary German society. Initially, these poets wrote in a symbolic and metaphysical, rather than a political or social, vein. It may be that their formalist bias had its origin in the era of the Prussian victory over France in 1871. Since that time, German society had enjoyed a widespread sense of socio-political and economic security. Hence, in the years just before World War I, politics had come to be ignored by the older generation and disdained as anti-intellectual by the younger. By 1915, however, the full horror of the human catastrophe being wrought by the war had shaken the German people into a new, unavoidably historical consciousness. Whereas pre-war Expressionists had apprehended the decay of Wilhelmine culture in spiritual and philosophical terms, now the need for a socio-political literary praxis was urgently apparent. Thus, stage Expressionism appeared in a context of cultural emergency with the implicit mandate of articulating a new, *historical* understanding of contemporary German society. Yet, because of the political and social turmoil of this era, its development was more discontinuous and diversified than pre-war literary Expressionism. Therefore, to speak of “Expressionist theatre” is to speak of a wide variety of work by artists loosely associated in their historical situation rather than to signify a well-defined coterie united by aesthetic agreement and geographic proximity. The pre-war literary circles had been urban artistic collectives functioning exclusively in a given German city. During the war years, by contrast, the styles of Expressionist theatre productions emerged in a much more de-centralized way, having no such clear-cut geographical identity.

While the Expressionist lyric had offered aesthetic escape from traditional Wilhelmine philistine culture, the Expressionist theatre struggled to enable Germans both to deal with the present devastation and to believe in a future recovery. For many involved in the Expressionist movement, the fulfilment of this faith depended on the