Introduction

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Theatre occupies a unique position in German-speaking Europe. Not only does each major city have its own heavily subsidised repertory theatre, usually with two or three stages of differing sizes, but it has its own opera house as well. Smaller cities that, in most countries, would probably never see professional theatre also support both a drama and an opera company, often performing on the same stage. A well-run theatre is, it seems, as necessary to the health of the community as a good public school system, a research university, a well-stocked library, a symphony orchestra, or even an efficient hospital and clinics. In brief, theatre in Germany matters.

For the last hundred years, German theatre has also made its impact upon the international community. The spectacular historicist productions of the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen in the 1880s and the brilliantly theatrical ensembles of Max Reinhardt a generation later were the first exports that drew world attention to German theatre. Since then, German theatre artists have been at the forefront in most of the major movements that have transformed international theatre. Since the 1920s, German scenic designers have revolutionised our concept of stage space, German directors have made the highly influential, though much contested claim that they are the key artists in a theatre performance, and German playwrights, most notably Bertolt Brecht, have provided models for a theatre that aims to change the very fundamentals of the society in which we live.

But German theatre was not always flourishing. In the late sixteenth century, when countries such as England, France and Spain were countering the decline of the great European tradition of religious drama with the rise of a secular, professional theatre, in Germany there were no cities large enough to host a vigorous and continuous theatre life. Furthermore, the extreme political fragmentation of Central Europe, not to mention the devastating economic and social damage wrought by the Thirty Years' War (1618–48), the consequences of which were felt well into the eighteenth century, meant that there was no opportunity for Germany to develop

a coherent and unified theatre culture. Theatre was not absent from Germany during this extended period. For all of the seventeenth and most of the eighteenth centuries, it was practised by troupes of strolling actors, who were initially of foreign, later of German extraction, and they may well have provided theatre of considerable vitality. Likewise, the French and Italian companies, housed in the many theatres attached to the ruling courts in the capitals of the myriad states that composed Germany at that time, were highly skilled in their various modes of performance. But however lively theatre might have been, until late in the eighteenth century it lacked a tangible presence in Germany; it was not organised as an institution that could interpret the public, and the private, world to its audiences and therefore make an imprint upon that world and contribute towards change, be it personal, social or political. But then, over the fifty or so years that spanned the turn of the eighteenth into the nineteenth century, the German theatre was transformed. Over this period, it achieved precisely the public profile that it had previously lacked. This book is in part the tale of how that transformation was prepared for, what it actually was, and how it has influenced and even guided the development of the German theatre to the present day.

The history of German theatre has, of course, its unique characteristics, and these have determined the organisation of this volume. First, theatrical and political growth did not go hand in hand in Germany. In fact, the theatre became a salient institution in German-speaking lands several decades before those lands achieved political unity. The great transformation that was initiated at the end of the eighteenth century came about primarily because the French and Italian companies that had occupied the court theatres for much of the century were dismissed and the travelling troupes of German-speaking actors took their place. Other troupes eschewed aristocratic patronage and settled into civic or municipal theatres. Yet others were hired by 'national theatres', which were founded in certain cities, often under royal or governmental patronage and protection. This process of settlement and the consequent elevation of the public profile of German actors occurred when Germany was still in a state of political fragmentation, a condition that only continued after the Congress of Vienna in 1814. This meant that, in contrast to other European countries where the nation state was already strong and unified under a central Government residing in its capital, in German-speaking Europe no one city became politically or culturally dominant. At the start of the nineteenth century, Vienna as the

capital of Austria had the most diverse theatre culture, but throughout the century, Berlin became increasingly important as a centre of theatrical life, and soon after it became capital of a unified Germany in 1871, it began to supersede Vienna. But neither of these two cities absorbed the entire resources of the German theatre. On the contrary, German-language theatre maintained its provincial character and theatrical talent was spread evenly over the entire network of theatres. This means that, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, not only did large cities such as Hamburg, Mannheim, Dusseldorf, Dresden, Leipzig, Frankfurt, Cologne, and Munich, make lasting contributions to the development of German theatre, but smaller towns, such as Weimar, Bayreuth, and Meiningen, did so as well. They could attract notable theatre artists and through the unusual quality and character of the work done on their stages exercise considerable influence over the theatres of larger cities.

The provincial nature of German theatre means that a history that focuses primarily on the growth of the stage in the capitals is incomplete. In the twentieth century Berlin and Vienna consolidated their positions as cultural capitals, so in the later chapters especially there is much discussion of their theatre, but not exclusively so. It would even be possible to organise a history of German theatre mainly around each of the cities,[1] but this geographical approach might not speak to the interests of English-speaking readers. We have assumed that they may be more concerned to discover the characteristics and functions of German-language theatre as a whole.

The question of function has provided one of the main organising principles of this volume. Germans, more perhaps than other Europeans, have been very much involved with the pragmatic influence that theatre exercises over society. Even before the establishment of 'standing' theatres at the end of the eighteenth century, vigorous debate had been conducted by such theoreticians and critics as J. E. Schlegel, Lessing, Schiller, and others as to what the purpose of theatre is. Much of the first half of this volume is therefore organised to highlight some of these purposes. After two chapters on the medieval German theatre, the Baroque theatre, and the strolling players, which give ample evidence that Germany was not a theatrical wasteland prior to the changes at the end of the eighteenth century, several of the following chapters centre upon one of the different functions that characterise the German stage through to the beginning of the twentieth century. These chapters are to be read as parallel stories, each one of which describes a stratum of German theatre history. Together it is to

be hoped that they will display a rich and complex performance culture that has attempted to serve its society in multiple ways.

Perhaps the most distinctive stratum of German theatre as it organised itself in the late eighteenth century was its declared mission to nurture within its audiences that uniquely German quality of *Bildung*, a concept that, as we learn in chapter 3, was most completely developed by Weimar Classicism. It aimed to make audiences not only into better citizens but into complete human beings with a capacity to live with confidence, even serenity in a conflicted world; theatre has rarely been granted a more elevated function. However, theatre cannot only elevate its audiences, it should also reflect and articulate their values and beliefs, so in chapter 4, the tradition of realism in playwriting, acting and production is mapped out, in order to display how the German theatre came to act as a cohesive force within society as a whole. As one of the few public institutions that bridged the fractured landscape of German-speaking Europe, the theatre also provided a means of generating a sense of national unity among a politically divided people; chapter 9, therefore, explores how the theatre and performance events tried to instil in the populace a sense of national identity and then, after a unified nation was achieved in actuality, how the theatre was used in the twentieth century to foster a heightened sense of national pride that led to the catastrophic consequences of Nazism and the Holocaust.

One of the most surprising moments in German theatre history is the seemingly sudden explosion of dissident, experimental performance in the decades immediately prior to and following the First World War. To a considerable degree, these were precipitated by the premonition and then by the actuality of social collapse. But the theatre was not entirely unprepared to represent this crisis in German history, as it had a reservoir of drama formally capable of addressing these themes. Hence, in a book that is devoted first and foremost to the performed theatre and drama, two chapters centre, one partly, another in whole, on the important matter of drama that was unperformed in its time. Chapter 5 traces the way in which the intense subjectivism of romanticism, a key movement in German cultural history, did not initially find a theatre that was artistically suited to its expression, but by the late nineteenth century it was beginning to do so and in so doing prepared the ground for the experiments of the twentieth century. But even more significantly, there had been a subterranean tradition of social protest in drama from *Sturm und Drang* on, which provided the basis for both expressionism and the epic theatre of Bertolt Brecht. Most of the plays in

this tradition, which are discussed in chapter 6, had to wait for up to a century to be performed, both because censorship kept them from performance and because the rough and seemingly disjointed nature of their language and action was unsuited to the production modes and acting styles of the time. The eruption of these plays onto German stages in the early twentieth century makes discussion of them in the context of the time in which they were written a crucial element in a history of German theatre.

As this volume proceeds and, in the second half, comes to focus primarily on theatre in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, there is a shift in the organising principle away from the multiple functions of the theatre and more towards categories of artistic work within the theatre. In large part this shift is caused by the singular phenomenon of the director who, as many contributors to this volume point out, occupies a position of unusual power. Today in many countries the director is, for good or ill, the dominant artist in most theatrical productions, but it was in German-speaking Europe that the director, as one whose vision unifies the diverse disciplines of performance, first emerged. Chapter 7 explores the institutional and artistic reasons for the rise of the director and traces, into the middle of the twentieth century, the advancement of this figure whose imagination becomes the prime shaping force within performance. Given the continued gravitation of the modern and contemporary German repertoire towards the classics, the director has maintained this pre-eminent position, as variety in the interpretation of a familiar canon of dramatic work is one of the major attractions drawing audiences into the theatre today. But as chapters 11 and 13 both demonstrate, the director and the stage designer are capable of arousing great antipathy as well as enthusiasm; they are at one and the same time the *bêtes noires* and the golden boys and girls of the contemporary German theatre.

Even though performance of the classics is central to the German theatre, Germany has also been the source of many plays that have both passed into the international repertoire and had a strong influence upon playwrights elsewhere. For example, while Germany was the home of expressionist theatre, expressionism was as effectively practised, both as a theatrical medium and as a dramatic form, in the United States. Similarly the great revival of British theatre that began in the late 1950s and has never really died out since would be unthinkable without the example of Brecht's epic theatre, which provided a model both for productions in Britain of Shakespeare and other classic dramatists and for a whole generation of

playwrights who used the stage to address the injustices and inequities of social and political life. Germany is still a leader in the field of playwriting, though, as we discover in chapter 12, the newest work is leading the theatre away from the aesthetic of dramatic representation upon which most performance has been based into a 'post-dramatic phase' in which the very concept of representation is called into question. Where the German theatre will go from here is uncertain.

One thing is certain – theatrical performance will continue to be a spatial medium. Indeed, the precise and imaginative use of space has always been a precondition for the success of almost any theatrical performance. From the building of the Bayreuth Festival Theatre in 1876, Germany has been to the fore in experimentation with different configurations of the auditorium and stage in order to maximise the potential for communication between audience and actors. Chapter 10 chronicles these experiments.

The stratified approach to history tends to highlight the work of those theatre artists who achieved significance because their work was seminal to more than one of the different functions exercised by the German theatre. Hence, in the eighteenth century Lessing, Goethe and Schiller appear as key figures not only in the development of theatre as an agency of *Bildung*, but also in the growth of a realistic theatre, so they are central to both chapters on those themes. Similarly the nineteenth-century figures of Wagner and the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen loom large in several chapters, not only because their work was crucial in the development of a realistic scenography, but because it had other ramifications as well; the Protean Wagner, for example, can be found in the chapters on realism, romanticism, nationalism, and theatre architecture. In the twentieth century Reinhardt and Brecht feature most frequently. In each instance when a multifaceted artist's name appears, different aspects of his or her work are stressed; it is hoped that, by the end of the book, the reader will have a clear idea of the manifold significance of such artists' work.

A particular challenge that faces any historian of German theatre is to determine what exactly 'Germany' is. After all, Germany did not become a nation until the Treaty of Versailles in 1871 and even then very significant areas of German-speaking Europe were not included in the new nation, most notably Austria and German Switzerland. By the term 'German', therefore, this volume assumes all of German-speaking Europe and the German-language theatre that was performed in this large area. This should not be interpreted as a claim that the theatre history of all German-speaking

countries can only be understood as a part of the larger whole. On the contrary, Austrian theatre in particular has its own distinctive styles and traditions that distinguish it from all other European countries and to do these justice a separate volume would be necessary. Swiss theatre also has its own distinctive quality which cannot be adequately discussed in a volume like the present one.

A further question arises as to what materials a theatre history should consider. As the performance on stage is the central matter of this volume, all the separate arts that compose the work of performance are treated, in the first half of the book in association with each other, but in the latter half separately. Opera occupies a particularly privileged position in German theatre because the theatrical aspects of the genre have, arguably, been more readily acknowledged in Germany than elsewhere. Much scenic innovation has occurred in the name of opera and experiments in the staging of canonical operas have been more frequent and, in the view of many critics, more extreme, than in other countries. This history refers then to the performance of both spoken drama and opera, though in its discussion of the texts of theatre greater emphasis has been placed upon playwriting than upon operatic scores. These are touched upon briefly, mainly in chapter 5, but are not discussed from a musical point of view.

Finally, although many chapters are concerned with the impact theatre has upon society, it is the theatrical work as experienced by audiences that is the core of this history. It does not, therefore, contain discussion of theatre management, actor training, professional regulation, and other important institutional matters. These, we hope, will be the subject of future histories of the German theatre.

1 German medieval theatre: Tenth century to 1600

ECKEHARD SIMON

The beginnings

Medieval theatre began in the Christian church during the tenth century. On Easter morning, three monks dressed as the Marys walked up to the church altar, representing Christ's tomb, where a fourth brother, playing a white-robed angel, chanted *Quem queritis* ('Whom are you seeking?'). 'Jesus of Nazareth', the Marys responded. 'He is not here', the angel informed them, 'the Lord has risen'. Liturgical dramas were also performed at Christmas, around the visitation of the three Kings and shepherds worshipping at the manger, and later, in the twelfth century, clerics composed and performed Latin Christmas pageants on subjects such as the Beauvais *Play of Daniel* and the Tegernsee *Play of the Antichrist*. Church people abominated theatre as a pagan vanity, so they considered their 'offices' or 'orders of worship' purely as embellishments to hourly or canonical services and the Mass, the only purpose of which was to represent the story commemorated by the feast.

German gradually found its way into these Latin plays. During Easter around 1160, as clerics in Salzburg cathedral finished chanting the liturgical play of the three Marys' visit to Christ's tomb, the cantor instructed the lay audience to sing the Easter hymn *Christ ist erstanden* ('Christ has risen'), which is probably the first time that the German language was used in drama. Some decades later, around 1230, scribes in an Austrian abbey entered a Passion play into the song collection, *Carmina Burana*. In this Mary Magdalene sang courtly love songs and the Virgin Mary lamented the death of her crucified son in German. In these verses, expressing joy and sorrow, the 'mother language' of German began to replace the 'father language' of Latin. By 1250, Franciscan friars were reaching larger audiences by preaching in German, while mystics used German to express their visions. German religious theatre began as part of that new spirituality. Around 1260, a cleric, probably in Zurich, inserted German verses into a Latin Easter play. This *Osterspiel von Muri (Easter Play of Muri*) – named for the monastery where fragments of the vellum scroll on which it was inscribed were found – was a

pageant of some 1,200 verses of which 612 survive, featuring Mary Magdalene, the ointment merchant, and soldiers at the tomb. In the north, a cleric near Nordhausen, Thuringia, used north or Low German for a Passion play dramatising the life and death of Jesus. Only tiny snippets of the vellum manuscript, which were discovered in the Himmelgarten monastery, survived; on them are recorded the Flight to Egypt, the Three Magi, Satan tempting Jesus, Jesus calling his disciples, and the Wedding at Cana. This constitutes the first Passion play written in a European vernacular language.

Secular German theatre dates from over a century later, with one High and one Low German text. Around 1370 a scribe, probably from Schwäbisch Gmünd, entered the *St Paul (Swabian) Neidhart Play* of 58 verses into a formulary collection, which is now in the Austrian Abbey of St. Paul, Carinthia. Anticipating Carnival theatre, this play features the legendary court poet Neidhart (d. *c.*1240), a 'knight' who tricks peasants because they disgrace him by replacing the first violet of spring, a love token he meant to give to his patroness, an Austrian duchess, with a pile of faeces. At the same time, in the Osnabrück region, a medical man wrote down a sketch of 60 verses in which seven women woo the same man. Probably performed by young men during Carnival, the farce is a pastiche of an Old Testament passage in which the prophet Isaiah castigates the wanton women of Jerusalem, who, having lost their men in war, are desperate for husbands.

The repertory

Thousands of religious and secular plays, written by anonymous clerics, school teachers, town clerks, merchants and craftsmen, were performed between 1250 and 1550, but only about 300 of these texts have survived. Because many of these performances, even in churches, were sponsored by municipal authorities, records of their production are plentiful. Treasurers recorded subsidies for stage construction and payments to actors, town councillors licensed and prohibited public theatricals, and chroniclers reported major performances. Town archives of the period[1] show that from 1400 on theatre was performed in virtually every German town. Indeed, throughout Europe, theatre was the most important medium of public entertainment and communication.

The various dialects of German were spoken over a wider area than the boundaries of present-day Germany. We have records of German

performances from Riga (Latvia), Danzig/Gdansk, and Breslau/Wroclaw (Poland) in the north to Pressburg/Bratislava (Slovakia), Sterzing/Vipiteno and Bozen/Bolzano (Italy) in the south, from Eger/Cheb (Bohemia) in the east, to Arnhem and Deventer (the Netherlands) and Strasbourg and Colmar (France) in the west. Theatre was most prolific between 1450 and 1550. Some regions and towns became performance centres, in particular Thuringia, the Rhineland and Hesse (Mainz, Frankfurt am Main, Alsfeld), Nuremberg and Lübeck (for Carnival plays), Switzerland (Lucerne, Basel, Bern, Zurich), and the South Tirol (Sterzing, Bozen).

Religious plays

The ritual function of drama dictates that each play conform to a type. An Easter play has a distinct form, no matter when or for which church a cleric wrote it. About two thirds of all religious plays were staged during the Easter season. Easter plays dramatise the Resurrection, with soldiers guarding the tomb in vain, the Marys buying ointments from a merchant, and the risen Christ harrowing Hell. Passion plays extend these events backwards in time to dramatise the life of Christ, especially his crucifixion. They usually include Mary's semi-operatic lament (*Marienklage*) beneath the cross, which was peculiar to German theatre and often staged separately on Good Friday. On Ascension Day, churches enacted Christ's ascension to heaven; on Corpus Christi, townspeople, venerating the Eucharist, performed the entire history of salvation.

Plays about the end of time – on the Five Wise and Five Foolish Virgins, the Coming of Antichrist, and the Last Judgement – were sometimes put on at Christmas. Most plays staged during the twelve days of Christmas, however, depicted Old Testament prophets foretelling the Saviour's birth in a stable, the nativity, the shepherds and the Three Kings bringing gifts, and the flight of Mary and Joseph into Egypt to escape Herod's murderous rage. Townspeople staged plays to commemorate saints, from the feast day of Saint Paul (25 January) to Saint Margaret's (13 July). Morality plays, featuring allegorical figures, virtues and vices battling for the human soul, were less popular in Germany than in England, France, and the Low Countries, but a three-day morality play dramatising gospel parables was performed in Erfurt prior to 1448. Morality plays were staged during Carnival in Lübeck after 1439 and Strasbourg put on Sebastian Brant's *Tugent Spyl*, featuring a contest between Lady Virtue and Lady Lust in 1518. Swiss towns performed political moralities, especially after the Reformation.