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978-1-107-05100-3 - Popular Musical Theatre in London and Berlin: 1890–1939

Edited by Len Platt, Tobias Becker and David Linton

Excerpt

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Introduction

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After the Girl – by way of a prescript

Several months before the outbreak of the First World War, a new piece of popular musical theatre opened at the Gaiety Theatre in London's West End. *After the Girl* told the story of Doris Pitt, the daughter of a Cincinnati millionaire sent to Brussels to complete her education. When her father arrives on a visit in Paris, he finds her 'corrupted' and determines to send her back home. Doris, however, has other ideas. Pursued by an anxious father, she runs away – first to a school friend in Amsterdam, then to Budapest and then on to Berlin, where Mr Pitt finally catches up with her. She is performing as a singer in a variety hall. Father and daughter are eventually reconciled, and the show ends with them celebrating the New Year at the Carlton Hotel in New York.

After the Girl reads like a comment on popular theatre before the First World War. Although it appears to be a musical comedy in most respects, its title and subtitle signify distance from that genre. The show takes on the dimensions of a hybrid commodity, becoming a 'Revusical Comedy'. Its writers acknowledge the form, which had been dominant across Europe and America since the 1890s, but at the same time emphatically identify the new show with revue, the rising genre popular on the Continent and in New York since the early 1900s, but which did not start to gain real momentum in London until shortly before the outbreak of the First World War. *After the Girl* marked the moment when the West End's hitherto most popular genre, musical comedy, faced a challenge that was to prove decisive. The ambiguities of the show's title positions *After the Girl* very specifically in a post-girl world, beyond the 'girl shows' which had been so much part and parcel of musical comedy culture up to that time, albeit simultaneously making a not quite final contribution in this respect.

The further interest lies in the roaming disposition of the show's central character. Doris Pitt, the American who travels all over Europe, can be read as

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a symbolic representation of cultural exchange in popular theatre. Paris, Vienna, Budapest, Berlin and New York were, together with London, part of a transnational network through which plays, music, dances and performers were endlessly exchanged. Many continental operettas were adapted as musical comedies in Britain, just as many West End musical comedies travelled all over the Continent. Since the hugely popular 1897 show *The Belle of New York*, America had been actively participating in this process. The growing cultural influence of the United States before the First World War explains, incidentally, why Doris, a character in a West End show, is American rather than English. That she ends her journey as a singer in a Berlin variety theatre is also suggestive, since London and Berlin were important in this network from the late nineteenth century on, and the theatre exchange between these two cities was especially vibrant.

West End and Friedrichstraße / Britain and Germany

The emphasis in this collection on London and Berlin in the decades between 1890 and 1939 responds to a number of issues. On the one hand it fills an obvious gap. As a number of contributions to *Popular Musical Theatre in London and Berlin* show, the enduring quality of the operettas of Jacques Offenbach and Johann Strauss has led popular musical theatre to be emphatically associated with the cities of Paris and Vienna. Particularly focused on in such early texts as Siegfried Kracauer's magisterial *Offenbach and the Paris of his Time* (1938), the operettas of both composers and their influence on the musical theatre of other nations are now established in the contexts of urbanisation and modernity. By comparison, London and Berlin have been comparatively neglected, despite the fact that both cities developed their own brands of musical theatre from the 1880s in all the most popular forms – operetta, musical comedy and revue – with Berlin in particular gaining in reputation as ‘one of the most vibrant entertainment centers in turn-of-the-century Europe’.¹ A study of London and Berlin from this perspective, set against the wider contexts of sites like Paris, Vienna and New York, adds not only to our knowledge of the theatre history of this period, but also to our understanding of the wider cultural histories of these cities. Perhaps even more importantly, it sheds new light on European cultural relations.

This leads to another reason why the popular musical theatre of a century ago is still of interest today. The relations between Britain and Germany in the ‘Age of Empire’ have long been viewed in terms of an essential and almost unbridgeable Anglo-German hostility. Only recently have historians begun

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to reconsider this relationship, placing the undeniably difficult public political context against a more everyday reality where things were more ambiguous and nuanced. As Dominik Geppert and Robert Gerwarth point out in their introduction to a 2008 collection of transcultural essays entitled *Wilhelmine Germany and Edwardian Britain*, ‘intense feelings of cultural proximity’ between Britain and Germany seemed to go hand in hand with ‘widespread antagonism’, certainly at the broader cultural level – a contradiction illustrated right across *Popular Musical Theatre in London and Berlin*.² To put it rather differently, musical theatre in these two cities was a compelling example of what the anthropologist Marie Louise Pratt has termed a ‘contact zone’, predicated in part on business cultures and structures, but also on an aspirational sense of metropolitan style culture – except that here, suggestively, the dynamic was established not across an advancing centre and retreating periphery, as in the familiar anthropological model, but, rather, across centres competing for authority in, if not ascendancy over, the modern.³ Cultural exchange between London and Berlin in the field of popular musical theatre illustrates this dynamic very clearly. To take London and Berlin as examples thus reintroduces two neglected centres back into the transnational network of popular theatre and, by considering two nations which, perhaps more than any others, exhibited mutual hostility across the late nineteenth and early to mid twentieth centuries, throws new light on much wider issues, including the practices that once typified Anglo-German historiography. Seen against this context, London and Berlin theatre zones become complex sites of fundamental contradiction, not least in the sense that both are deeply inscribed with markers of local and national identity and yet both are representative of a modern cosmopolitan commons.

At first glance there appear to be deep differences between London and Berlin and their central theatre districts, the West End and Friedrichstraße. While London had been an important European capital since medieval times, Berlin really started to develop into a metropolis only after the mid nineteenth century. Apart from differences in sheer size, this resulted in distinctions between how Londoners and Berliners identified with their respective cities. As distinct from the popular theatre of an earlier period, London as a subject did not play a huge representational part on the stage from the 1890s to the First World War.⁴ This is not to say that West End musical theatre took no pride in London – on the contrary, it seemed to take London’s capital city status as self-evident. The Berlin stage, on the other hand, was nothing short of obsessed with the city and city self-identification, denoting the capital’s newer development and its aspirations for the future. Indeed, it was on the stage that Berlin first claimed to be a

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Weltstadt, a world city – this as late as 1866 and at a time when its position in Germany was far from uncontested. While London was old and established, Berlin was a relative upstart, compared by Mark Twain with all the frontier-ship of a place like Chicago, which is why popular theatre took every opportunity to declare itself in relation to the new German metropolis.⁵

But there were also many commonalities between London and Berlin. Like Paris or New York, both were places where new, rapidly accelerating versions of modernity were being experienced in all their contradictions. The potentially opposing pulls of nationalism and cosmopolitanism; shifting gender identities and the conflict between new freedoms and the imperative to register new boundaries, not least in relation to sexualities; the challenges of new science; the fads and fashions of consumerism, which so shaped the emerging leisure culture and entertainment industry – all developed more or less simultaneously in these cities around 1900, through processes that took place not in isolation but in growing relatedness and interconnection. London's West End was admittedly bigger than Berlin's Friedrichstraße district both in terms of numbers of theatres and venue concentration. Its music halls and theatres could hold no fewer than 300,000 people per night in 1900, potentially handling up to 100 million attendances a year. But the Berlin stage, though smaller, was comparable in relation to relative populations.⁶ In addition, Berlin's theatre had long been dominated by its court theatre, which was subsidised by the crown and catered first and foremost to aristocratic society, whereas London theatre had been an independent, commercial endeavour since the time of Shakespeare. But this difference lost much of its importance in the 1860s, when Berlin witnessed a 'pandemic in theatre building'.⁷ All the new theatres were private, commercial enterprises, and their development took place in the context of a newly designed entertainment zone, just as the eastern half of London's West End around Northumberland Avenue, Charing Cross Road and Shaftsbury Avenue was rebuilt at this time. Although the concentration of music halls and theatres in the West End was unprecedented in Europe, only surpassed in this respect by New York's Broadway, Berlin developed its own *Theatergegend* (theatre district), on Friedrichstraße, a long, straight street stretching from the southernmost part of the city to its north, intersected by Unter den Linden, Berlin's famous boulevard. At one time seven theatres, including the biggest and most upbeat variety theatre of the city, as well as a circus, lay on or next to Friedrichstraße, which was close to the Gendarmenmarkt, where the Royal Theatre and the Royal Opera House were located. Although there were a number of theatres in the suburbs of Berlin, as in London, the theatres in

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the centre came to dominate much of the theatre culture of their respective nations.

The West End and Friedrichstraße, then, were converging in these ways and shared further characteristics. Both spaces were not only entertainment districts – with theatres, music halls, bars, restaurants and dance halls – they were also intensely commercialised shopping districts. Theatres shared the neighbourhood with big department stores like Selfridges in London or Wertheim in Berlin, as well as other fashionable shops and tailors. Other ‘spaces of modernity’ like railway stations, grand hotels and cinemas were also located here, the railway as well as the new underground lines delivering thousands to the doors of the theatres.⁸ These sites were associated with modernity – with mobility, speed, fashion and, of course, entertainment. In the usually intensely segregated cities they were new social spaces where the divides between classes and sexes were bridged or suspended. Theatres like the Gaiety or the Metropol-Theater were fashionable places where ‘everyone who was anyone’ visited, showing off status and surplus income in a celebration of conspicuous consumption. They were also ‘new heterosocial spaces’ where conventional ‘hierarchical gender messages’ could be challenged.⁹ Here men and women met, on terms that were relatively ‘equal’, to witness spectacular renditions of city life, performed on a twice-nightly basis – all to musical accompaniment.

Popular modernity: musical theatre and cosmopolite capitals

Musical theatre was one of the most important popular cultures of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It represented a key stage in the modernisation of the theatre and had a major impact on theatre aesthetics. In the case of revue, it produced challenging alternatives to the conservative progressivism of the book musical, making claims for itself as a characteristically modern cultural form.¹⁰ It also engaged in complex ways with ideas about the modern world, registering and shaping contemporary attitudes to class, gender and national identities and articulating mainstream political issues.

In both West End and Berlin versions, musical theatre across the period 1890–1939 made substantial claims for itself as a characteristically new, urban form, a fact not lost on contemporary observers, who understood it as highly symptomatic of a generic mass culture that appeared to transcend national boundaries. The early sociologist of the metropolis, Georg Simmel, himself extremely critical of popular culture and especially of variety theatre, which he despised, had cabaret, musical hall, variety and revue in mind

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when he described the aesthetics of ‘the fragment, the mere allusion, the aphorism, the symbol, the undeveloped artistic style’, aligning these qualities with the urban condition and a ‘blasé outlook’.¹¹ Other contemporary responses did little to undermine such readings of musical theatre. For theorists of modern decadence and degeneration, musicals signified nothing less than the decline of the West, demonstrating in their characteristic disposition for ‘gaiety’ how Europe had become feminised, unmanned. Wyndham Lewis, an iconoclast of Western modernity, reserved a special place for denigrating musical theatre and its exponents in the first issue of *Blast* (1914) where ‘Daly’s musical comedy’, the ‘Gaiety Chorus Girl’, George Edwardes – the famous producer-manager of the Gaiety and Daly’s – and the musical comedy actor, writer and producer Seymour Hicks all came in for special attention.¹²

It is not difficult to see why intellectuals should so focus on musical theatre in relation to the cultural and material composition of cosmopolitan and transcultural modernity. Ever since Peter Bailey’s 1998 essay ‘Theatres of Entertainment / Spaces of Modernity: Rethinking the British Popular Stage, 1890–1914’, cultural historians have likewise become used to recognising the importance of musical theatre, and not just in terms of shaping urban space at the turn of the century. As a number of the chapters in this collection show, it played a considerable role in defining city architecture, influencing its characteristic zoning and impacting on transport systems and the development of retail centres in both the West End and Friedrichstraße.¹³ Like the department store, theatres like the Berlin Metropol-Theater and the Gaiety and Daly’s in London were shapers of urban style and highly self-conscious of their status in this respect. Some of the most popular shows of the period – *The Girl from Kays* (1902) and *The Girl Behind the Counter* (1906), for instance – were often nothing less than sumptuous celebrations of contemporary consumerism. Indeed, the differences between theatres and department stores almost vanished when shop windows were staged with lighting and curtains reminiscent of the theatre, or when musical comedies like *Our Miss Gibbs* (1909) were set in department stores evoking places like Harrods or Wertheim. The early Metropol revues – *Neuestes, Allerneuestes!* (1903), *Ein tolles Jahr* (1904), *Auf ins Metropol* (1905), *Der Teufel lacht dazu* (1906), *Das muß man sehn* (1907), *Donnerwetter – tadello* (1908), *Halloh! Die große Revue* (1909), *Hurrah, wir leben noch* (1910), *Die Nacht von Berlin* (1911), *Chauffeur – ins Metropol* (1912) – operated similarly, often featuring scenes set in well-known Berlin department stores. Here escalators and revolving doors were reproduced as emblems of the modern age; songs applauded the

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apparently endless diversity and glamour of the modern shopping experience; costume often became product placement in a symbiotic relationship as department stores sold theatre tickets, decorated their shop windows like stages and sometimes bought stocks in theatre companies. Reflecting their consumerist age, the production costs of these spectacular shows were so high that a single failure could bring a theatre to the brink of bankruptcy. Richard Schultz, manager of the Metropol-Theater, spent the fantastic sum of 200,000 Reichsmark on the *mise-en-scène* of a single Berlin revue, while the Royal Opera House in Berlin had to make do with a budget of 30,000 RM for a revival of *Aida* in the same year.¹⁴ There can be little doubt that popular musical theatre in both centres reflected booming economies and the conditions that produced for the first time in England a rise in per capita incomes to ‘a comfortable 150 per cent above subsistence in 1914’.¹⁵ Growth rates in Germany were even more spectacular. Peter Fritzsche, for example, writing specifically about street car traffic and visits to Luna Park, notes how, ‘despite deep pockets of poverty, more and more workers could afford weekend entertainments and metropolitan diversions’.¹⁶

Perhaps the central defining characteristic of turn-of-the-century musical theatre, however, was its embrace of change, a quality that not only typified it as an urban culture, but also threw it once more into conflict with the intelligentsia. While intellectual culture typically mourned what was perceived as a loss of hierarchy and distinction in the modern world, musical theatre, certainly up to the First World War, was virtually unanimous in its celebration of the inventive consumerism of mass culture, demonstrating a technological authority that could reproduce the twentieth-century city through spectacular staging and effects.

Both modern and modernising dimensions of musical theatre were reflected in all elements of theatre production, finance and administration. They were also immanent in the narratologies of hundreds of shows, especially in the pre-war period, which repeatedly reproduced for their audiences an upbeat experience of living in contemporaneity, sometimes in ways surprisingly resonant for later generations. Alongside characteristically turn-of-the-century perspectives on such issues as race, class, gender and sexuality, there was a strong sensitivity shown to what we might now conceptualise in terms of ‘hyperrealities’ or the ‘ceremonising of the world’.¹⁷ Thematically obsessed with the representation of modern Berlin itself, the *Jahresrevuen* (annual revues) also demonstrated a parallel concern with self-reflection and image in general. In the *Kaiserreich* musical comedy *Die Kino-Königin* (1913) (*The Cinema Star*, 1914), film became indistinguishable from real life, as actual politics and their film reproduction merged into

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each other. In one of those strangely presentist moments so familiar to anyone who engages with this culture, a character declares that in her film image she sees herself ‘for the first time’. The same show plays with ideas about celebrity and identity formation. ‘The Picture Palace Queen Song’, sung by the female lead, who is a film actress, contains a lament not just for lost privacy, but for lost authenticity as well:

I’m all by starts and nothing long;
 And luckily my nerves are strong!
 For when I sleep, or when I waken
 A picture-film of me is taken!
 And every time I sing or laugh
 It means another photograph!
 For, sad or merry, well or ill,
 The camera pursues me still,
 Till every single thing I do
 Is thus exposed to public view.¹⁸

Even earlier, the Edwardian hit *The Arcadians* (1909) contained a second act which reproduces the utopian idyll of its first act Arcadia as a London city restaurant, a theme-park simulacrum of the real thing, complete with waitresses dressed as Arcadians, a vegetarian menu and copied versions of the key Arcadian equivalent to institutions.

Between the musical theatres of these two capitals there appeared to be a great deal of common territory at the turn of the century, much of it revolving around elaborate efforts to stage modernity itself, and department stores were not the only spectacle to be so reproduced. Race courses, restaurants, factories, dance halls, fairs and exhibitions – all were subject to the confident reproductive powers of modern musical theatre, as, indeed, were other cultures. In such shows as *The Geisha* (1896), *The Cingalee* (1904) and *The Blue Moon* (1904), Japan, India, Ceylon and Burma were subjected to a confident Orientalism often celebrated for what was taken to be its anthropological accuracy.¹⁹ Demonstrations of natural power, like the earthquake that erupted in Robert Courtneidge’s 1911 production *The Mousmé*, for example, film sets, ancient Greece, distant planets, eighteenth-century France – nothing, apparently, was beyond the staging powers of the musical stage as it searched for the latest new craze to bring before urban audiences.

Musical theatre at this time reflected the modern urban experience back to its urban and suburban spectators in very particular ways, constructing a version of modernity not only at odds with the dominant intellectual cultures of the day, but also with the realities of modern life. With astonishing consistency, the fantasist narratives of these shows celebrated a seemingly

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limitless capacity for assimilation and accommodation, quite contradicted in most respects by urban contemporaneities. A show like *Nelly Neil* (1907), for example, celebrated a harmless sing-along version of socialism; *The Quaker Girl* (1910) embraced religious dissent, repositioning plainness of dress and manner as Parisian haute couture; *An Artist's Model* (1895) was one of many shows that attempted to reconcile an alienating avant-garde with the commercial world; *The Shop Girl* (1894) put new class and gender identities within the all-encompassing embrace of the modern. Revue in this pre-war period, often represented as an outgrowth of music hall and variety, worked similarly. Despite the fact that it typically broke with narratological coherency, it used other structures to replace the same obsession with an assimilating order. Writing about the 1907 Metropol revue *Das muß man sehen*, Marline Otte shows how conservative and liberal spirits were reconciled through the figures of an agrarian *compère* and the liberal *Fräulein Freisinn* (the *commère*). The twinning, Otte argues, had racialised dimensions inasmuch as agrarian conservatives were often associated with anti-Semitism and liberalism often constructed in terms of a Jewish politics. In the show's version of things, these potentially conflictual forces end up not quite in agreement, but at least firmly cemented through matrimony. Children are subsequently produced and the tale concludes with an explicit plea for harmony. The suggestion of this framing narrative was clear. As Otte points out, for all the playing up to city pride and patriotism, 'no antagonism in German society was too great to overcome', at least in theatre land, a message repeated over and over both in individual sketches and other more encompassing frameworks in revue, especially, again, in those produced before the First World War.²⁰

More than a convenient motif or disposable fashion, this appetite for cohesion was the central organising principle of musicals at this time, in Berlin as in London. Just as evident in pre-war operettas as in musical comedies, it transcended genre. Franz Lehár's 1905 game-changing operetta *Die lustige Witwe* (*The Merry Widow*, 1907), for example, was similarly a configuration of accommodating modernity. Far from retreating to a fantasy 'Ruritania', it reconciled traditional aristocracy (Count Danilo) to a version of modernity more substantial than the decadent hedonism of bohemian Paris would allow. Agency here is represented by Anna, a figure who makes the transformation from peasant to become the engaging and astute widow of a figure most emblematic of the modern world in many of its guises, including current ones – a powerful banker. Leo Fall's *Die geschiedene Frau* (1908) (*The Girl in the Train*, 1910) was, again, an operetta styled in modern terms, as was *Die Dollarprinzessin* (1907) (*The Dollar Princess*, 1909), set in New York City and 'Aliceville', Canada in the

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London version. The latter opens with a chorus of female typists and the narrative challenge where new money is in the ascendancy and traditional aristocracy has been reduced to servitude. The gender counterpart to this potentially destabilising inversion, entirely commonplace in these shows, is that the brains behind the agency are female. Thus it is Alice, the dollar princess, who successfully advises her father on investments, at the same time making a personal fortune for herself ‘on the side’. The working out of these farce elements into harmonious resolution constituted the central narratological device of the show around which all the songs and social dances circulated.

Transfer/exchange

Marion Linhardt’s contribution to this collection, ‘Local contexts and genre construction in early continental musical theatre’, shows that there were strongly individuated traditions shaping the early formulations of the most popular genres at this time in all the key European centres – London, Paris, Berlin and Austria. The convergence in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, operating from music to book through to performance styles, staging and dance routines, was clear. Musical theatre became notable for its consistency and hybridity, its crossing of national boundaries as a matter of course. This collection traces and analyses these movements, with a particular focus on the London/Berlin axis. The chapters in this book explore the most intensive and creative part of this exchange history, from the mid 1890s to 1914, and the much-changed terms of its reinstatement after the interruption of the First World War.

In ‘Berlin/London: London/Berlin – an outline of cultural transfer 1890–1914’, Len Platt gives an overview of how shows transferred and were adapted in particular relation to the seemingly contradictory drivers of cosmopolitanism and nation formation. The chapter focuses on the systems supporting and circumscribing, in the broadest sense, ‘the flow and direction of traffic and the popularity of one form over another’. It identifies the nature of ‘translation’ in this early period and raises the issue of what contemporaries might have invested in the wider processes of adaptation.

The breadth of this chapter is contrasted by Chapter 4, ‘*The Arcadians* and *Filmzauber* – adaptation and the popular musical theatre text’, where Tobias Becker undertakes a textual analysis of how the specific musical theatre play text became transformed in the process of adaptation. Through critical readings of *The Arcadians / Schwindelmeier & Co.* (1909) and *Filmzauber / The*