1995

Sternheim's *Burger Schippel* and the Theatre Scene in Cologne

William Grange

*University of Nebraska - Lincoln*, wgrange1@unl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/theaterfilmfacpub](http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/theaterfilmfacpub)

Part of the [Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/theaterfilmfacpub)


This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in *zz Theatre & Film Faculty Publications* by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.
Cologne has for centuries been one of the most important cities in Europe; wealth and comfort are nothing new here. Yet unlike other German cities with perhaps an equal amount of prosperity it has never had a theatre history to match its stature as a major metropolitan center on the Continent. It has indeed had a troublesome and complicated relationship with theatre despite the fact that it is the fourth largest city in Germany (after Berlin, Hamburg, and Munich).

There are no individuals one associates with the foundation of a theatre tradition in Cologne, the way one thinks of Lessing with Hamburg, Iffland with Mannheim or Immermann with Dusseldorf. Jacques Offenbach was a native of Cologne, but he of course made a name for himself elsewhere. Several historical factors have contributed to Cologne's comparative dwarfishness as a theatre center; chief among them was the occupation of the city and the entire Rhineland region by the French 1794, an occupation which lasted until 1815. During that period Cologne's business class and leading citizens manifested little interest in developing theatre as a means to maintain its German identity. Neither did they concern themselves with promoting theatre as a worthy trademark of the city the way their counterparts in Hamburg, Frankfurt, and other commercial centers had begun to do. Cologne furthermore never benefited from the presence of a court in its midst to foster theatre as an object of aristocratic pride. As a result, theatre in Cologne developed slowly and with difficulty and it was not until the twentieth century that an ongoing theatre tradition became well-established here.

At its center is the municipal theatre, the Schauspielhaus. The repertoire this fall includes Carl Sternheim's *Bürger Schippel*, Brecht's *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan* and the Broadway musical *Fiddler on the Roof*. The Schauspielhaus also operates two small studio theatres, the Kalk Halle and the West End. Other theatres in the city are much less well endowed (the Schauspielhaus this year will receive a subsidy of about $22,000,000) and are less wedded to Establishment tastes. They likewise are taking few chances.

These theatres receive grants for their business expenses, not for their production costs. The Senftöpchen ("little mustard pot") presents transvestite cabaret shows on a regular basis and the Theater am Sachsenring bills itself a "Gewalt Kabarett," or "cabaret of violence." Performances in both venues are considered eccentric but not objectionable. The Piccolo, the Horizont, the Orania, and the Theater im Bauturm are companies receiving outlays both from the Cologne Culture Office and from the Cultural Ministry of North Rhine-Westphalia. The smallest of them is the Piccolo, currently presenting Dario Fo's *Tutta casa, letto, e chiesa* along with Jane Martin's *Talking With*. The Horizont has an ambitious season this year, presenting three outstanding German plays on week-ends. This fall their repertoire will consist of Bruckner's *Elisabeth von England*, Goetz's comedy *Ingeborg*, and Kokoshka's Expressionist thriller *Mörder, Hoffnung der Frauen*. The Urania is alternating Dale Wasserman's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* with Yorca's *House of Bernarda Alba*. The Theater im Bauturm is the newest of this group as well as the most energetic; they are currently running Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and Joe Orton's *Loot* in full-time alternating repertoire; two other full-length plays will join the repertoire in November.

Cologne has two unique theatres also worth mentioning; one is the Kume (the name in the local dialect for "comedy"), which presents, as its name implies, comedies in this nearly incomprehensible dialect, Kölsch. The other is the Volkstheater Millowitsch, which concentrates on old farce from the Wilhelmine and the Weimar periods, presented on a long-run basis. Its star is the octogenarian Willy Millowitsch, who has been a fixture in Cologne theatre life since the 1940s, starring in farce comedies that have played to full houses for decades. This fall he and his colleagues are presenting *Scholbmeister Bollman* by Max Reimann. Millowitsch has long been a celebrated figure in Cologne's theatre life, and his birthday, January 8, has in the past been cause for municipal celebration. The question in the minds of many Millowitsch audience members now is, who can replace him?

At the Cologne Schauspielhaus, Torsten Fischer's production of *Bürger Schippel*, the landmark
satire on Wilhelminian manners and morals appears at first to be a tribute to bygone days of unquestioned loyalty to Kaiser and Kuchen, to crown and country. Above the proscenium arch is emblazoned “Dem Deutschen Volke,” a duplication of the motto (which means “dedicated to the German people”) above the main entry to the Reichstag in Berlin. On the floor center stage sits a large bust of what appears to be Bismarck, crowned with a laurel wreath of gold. Against the stage left wall one detects the shadow of the Hohenzollern coat of arms.

Those appearances soon give way to other, more significant appearances. The setting is less official and more domestic; it is actually a bourgeois living room, in the center of which sits an overstuffed red sofa. The stage floor is also red; so are the walls. The floor is set at an angle of about 60°; “How are actors going to negotiate that floor?” one immediately wonders. The languorous entrance of Katja Bellinghausen as Thekla Hicketier and Caroline Schreiber as her stepmother Jenny Hicketier answers that question, as they move across it very carefully. One sudden, non-calculated move could result in a severely sprained ankle, or at best in an embarrassing pratfall. These are supposed to be Wilhelminians, after all, with a pronounced sense of dignity and decorum. The actresses slowly progress through their opening scene, in which Thekla mourns the recent loss of her fiancé and Jenny tries gently to comfort her. It is almost as if it were a seduction scene; and then one realizes that in Fischer’s conception, it is. Jenny caresses Thekla’s hips, breasts, and neck; the bust of Bismarck gazes stoically at the proceedings, while the audience senses that surely, the Kaiser himself would disapprove of such goings-on.

He would approve, however, of the upstanding men who soon make their entrance, namely the goldsmith Tilmann Hicketier and his companions Wolke and Krey. Any Kaiser would be proud of these model citizens, one a court official, the other an owner of a printing business. Yet once again, first appearances give way to what is really going on; these men, as well as the women, are really targets of Sternheim’s brilliant attack on the Wilhelminian sense of upright middle class morality. The solid German Bürgertum is about to be punctured, deflated and fall flat on its face.

That happens with the entrance of Dirk Bach as Paul Schippel, a penurious clarinet player eager to join the middle class. First he must prove himself as a tenor in the quartet Hicketier has formed for an upcoming local competition. They have heard that Schippel can hit an “A” just below high C; if he can do that, there is little doubt that they will win the
gold laurel of this year’s competition. Bach’s entrance, however, is a sight gag unto itself. The man stands about five feet, three inches tall and weighs approximately two hundred pounds. He is dressed in “the only clothes I own,” and in designer Carol Brands’ conception he looks as though they are the only clothes he’s ever worn. When he stands next to the elegantly tuxedoed six foot, five inch form of Marcus Kiepe (who plays Krey and weighs only about 160 pounds) on the steeply inclined stage Kiepe stands upstage of Schippel and towers over him. The result is an image that endures throughout the performance. These are creatures who have heretofore inhabited different worlds entirely. They speak in the forced “officialese” of the Wilhelmine years, a patois which one might have read on signs in railway stations and in government pronouncements, but which no one actually spoke. If they had they would have appeared ridiculous and they could not have understood one another.

Those are exactly the circumstances in which these characters find themselves. One misunderstanding leads to another until finally Krey and Schippel find themselves on “a field of honor,” dueling with pistols for the favors of Thekla. She, of course, cares for neither one of them and is sleeping with the local noblemen. Schippel somehow wins the duel (Krey faints after Schippel misfires his weapon), and with a triumphant “Ich bin Bürger!” Schippel confers upon himself the title he so diligently has sought. Bach’s performance as Schippel is underplayed, in contrast to the bombast employed by Alexander Grill as Hicketier and his two bourgeois compatriots, the aforementioned Marcus Kiepe and Karl-Ernst Mercker as Wolfe. Director Fischer has staged the production as if these characters were two-dimensional; they must move slowly due to the steep rake of the stage, and moving up- and downstage requires both concentration and dexterity. The front lighting throws deep shadows across the floor and up the walls.

The strong contrast of the shadows to the live figures on stage complements designer Herbert Schäfer’s walls made of paper. The actors cut holes in the walls, tear them apart, fall through them, and ultimately destroy the walls in the course of every performance; they must be rebuilt and repainted every time Bürger Schippel is presented. They represent the

*Bürger Schippel* at the Cologne Schauspiel. Photo: Klaus Lefebvre
fragile “house of cards” that was Wilhelmine society. It looked solid and substantial; it was home to a prosperous, yet prejudiced, belligerent, and self-satisfied middle class. When proletarians like Paul Schippel finally gained entrance to Wilhelmine society, they discovered the place was a shambles.

This production presumes that a parallel exists between the days of Chancellor Otto von Bismarck and those of Chancellor Helmut Kohl. The contrast then between the bourgeois and the proletarian was obvious. So is the one now between the smug and prosperous West German and his shabby counterpart in the East. The East German wants what the West German has, and as a German feels he’s entitled to it. An unforeseen set of circumstances has thrown the two together, just as in the play. The parallels which director Fischer draws are not always accurate; Sternheim, for example, pointed to the emptiness of bourgeois German values in this play, but Fischer views Schippel as a man willing to accept middle class values without question.

Sternheim saw the bourgeoisie in Germany as a destructive force and as such its pomposity was easy to deflate. The audiences who see this play in the Cologne Schauspielhaus are almost wholly bourgeois, but this production does not attempt to deflate their values. It attempts rather to make the aforementioned historical parallels more easily accessible. Dick Bach, for example, is a well known television performer; he is almost cuddly at times in his desire to become a Bürger. The audience can almost imagine him, or someone like him from Leipzig or Chemnitz, going into a Mercedes showroom for the first time in his life and simply gazing at an object he never imagined he might own.

At the same time, audiences may be reluctant to see themselves in the character of Tillmann Hicketier, yet the production implies that this pharisaical Philistine is one of them. Alexander Grill plays Hicketier as a “man without qualities,” a man with possessions (such as his sister, whom he must marry off), stature in his community (which he must defend at all costs), and a comfortable life. Audiences in Cologne are extremely comfortable, and the production makes no effort to dislodge them from that position.