Hitler's "Whiff of Champagne": Curt Goetz and Celebrity in the Third Reich

by William Grange

Adolf Hitler and his National Socialist German Workers' Party were obsessed with keeping the German theatre tradition vital and maintaining Berlin as a "cultural metropolis" after Hitler's appointment as Reich Chancellor on 30 January 1933. Upholding a dynamic and energetic cultural life for the nation was a task for which National Socialism, as a political movement embodying the "will of the people," felt itself eminently well qualified. The Nazis, therefore, began almost as soon as they took over the reins of government in Germany to support theatre as an art form and theatres as institutions to an extent unprecedented in German history.

Though they had condemned much of the comedy prevalent in the Weimar Republic as decadent and perverse, they had no desire to remove comedy from German stages, but rather to reform it completely; indeed, they assigned comedy an important role in the task of "re-awakening the spirit of the people" because comedy "came from the heart." It "sprang from the depths of the peoples' roots as a nation, and it unites us as a people," according to one cultural panjandrum in a 1936 treatise titled "Culture in Service to the Nation," by Wilhelm Westecker. Westecker went on to demand that German comedy of the future should resemble that of either Hans Sachs in sixteenth-century Nuremberg or Ferdinand Raimund in nineteenth-century Vienna. The "new Germany," he said, needed a new kind of comedy, one distinct from the "civilized filth" of comedies popular in the Weimar Republic. That kind of comedy (one based on improbable situations and distinguished by witty dialogue) was not only filthy, another critic remarked; it had occasioned "enormous damage to the integrity of the German people" because it exposed "life-sustaining values" to "cheap, easy laughter."

The problem for Nazi authorities was that German audiences actually preferred cheap, easy laughter and wanted more of it. Playwrights and theatre directors therefore came under enormous pressure to produce "politically correct" comedies that also attracted audiences. Thus the career of the comic playwright and actor, Curt Goetz, during the Third Reich is an exemplary instance of how doctrinally flexible the Nazis became in formulating their theatre policy and how susceptible they were to a theatrical celebrity. Goetz was, by 1933, one of the German theatre's most popular and successful artists, one whom critics labeled "the German Noël Coward."
Audiences associated his name with Coward's in the Weimar Republic years when he translated several of Coward's comedies into successful German versions. He then wrote some of his own with distinct "Cowardly" dimensions. His plays, however, were precisely the kind of polished indecency that Nazi critics had for years condemned. Yet in the Third Reich, Goetz gradually enjoyed an even loftier status than he had in the Republic. There were 236 different productions of Goetz plays from 1933 to 1944, and the numbers of performances during those years exceeded 6,000. Goetz further complemented his theatrical endeavors under the Nazi regime with film work. His Napoleon ist an allem Schuld (It's All Napoleon's Fault) in 1938 parodied the illusions of a dictator, yet few in authority objected to its patent parallels to Hitler. During the Third Reich he resided in Switzerland, but unlike so many other German playwrights who sought safety and refuge beyond German borders, he never suffered ostracism, and published versions of his plays were spared the public bonfires. Goetz enjoyed official favor, though he never courted it; he never directly criticized the Hitler regime, but he never openly supported it. Even when he left Europe altogether in 1939 and sailed for New York, Nazi authorities did not interpret his departure as defection; productions of his plays remained by the score in the repertoires of theatres throughout the German-speaking world (which, by the time Goetz left, the Third Reich almost completely encompassed).

His status as a German émigré did not affect his American career, either, as it did so many other German artists. At the very height of World War II, Goetz was able to mount and star in a Broadway production of his Das Haus in Montevideo (titled It's a Gift), a comedy about a German professor with twelve children who had inherited a brothel in Paraguay. After World War II, he returned to Europe and resumed his work in German, maintaining a popularity and appeal in what were by that time two German republics. He sold a film script to one of his most popular plays in the Third Reich, Dr. med. Hiob Prätorius (Job Pretorius, M.D.) for $100,000 to Twentieth Century-Fox, continued to direct and star in productions of his own plays on tour, and made films that were among the most popular of the 1950s. When Goetz died in 1960 at age seventy-two, his artistic career had spanned six decades and five German government regimes, providing a valuable and unique sense of continuity to the German theatre and to the Germans as a whole. How was this career in the German popular theatre (as opposed to the politically committed theatre, such as Brecht's) possible? What forces militated against its survival, and what proved strong enough to assure its prosperity?

Curt Goetz was born Kurt Götz on 17 November 1888, in Mainz on the Rhine River. He grew up in a nursing home his widowed mother managed, where he began his show business career by putting on puppet shows for the aged residents of the home. He entered professional theatre life when he enrolled in Emmanuel Reicher's acting school in Berlin when he was eighteen years old and got his first acting job during the 1908–9 season, while Kaiser Wilhelm II was on the throne of Imperial Germany. He did fifty-eight different plays in that season alone, at the Municipal Theater of
Rostock. The following season he was at the Intimes Theater in Nuremberg, where the workload was equally heavy and the roles likewise small. The next season he got a job with Viktor Barnowsky (1875–1952) in Berlin, which marked a profound turning point in his fortunes. With Barnowsky, one of the most accomplished of boulevard theatre directors, Goetz began to learn his trade, one which involved providing a relatively wealthy middle class with “amusing, polished manifestations of itself as a cultured and sophisticated caste.”

Goetz continued to play minor parts in comedies that were essentially “clever fabrications of superficial middle-class dilemmas.” He also began to write screenplays on the side while in Barnowsky’s employ, a time when screenplays amounted to no more than ten-minute sketches—but the process gave him entrée into the Berlin film industry.

Barnowsky steadily gave him larger roles to play, especially in the plays of George Bernard Shaw; by the early 1920s, Goetz was recognized as “the best Shaw actor Germany has to offer.” Götz and Shaw, as both men discovered when Shaw came to see a production in which Goetz was appearing, turned out to be distant cousins. A more crucial discovery for Goetz and his subsequent playwriting career, however, was his exposure during his Barnowsky years to the comedies of Noël Coward. Kurt Götz the actor

1. Curt Goetz. Courtesy of the Theatre Collection, University of Cologne, Institute for Theatre, Film, and Television.
began the transformation into Curt Goetz the playwright when he translated and starred in Coward’s *The Young Idea*; the result was so popular that he took it on the road as a vehicle for himself and later appeared in several of the Coward plays he had translated. The experience of translating Coward, along with the success of performing his own translations, encouraged him to try his hand at writing original full-length plays. *Hokus pokus* proved to be the motor that propelled him into the ranks of Germany’s most successful theatre artists. In 1925 it made its world premiere in Stettin, an eastern port city that had rarely been the site of noteworthy premieres. Goetz said later that Stettin was a good place for a world premiere since the play was not really ready for opening in Berlin—although many of the Berlin press critics were present in Stettin and pronounced it a hit. Like Coward, Goetz played the leading role in his own play; also like a comedy by Coward, *Hokus pokus* featured highly stylized conversation in the form of sophisticated repartee and stunning ripostes. When it made its Berlin premiere under Barnowsky in 1927 it was a hit all over again with critics and audiences; three years later Goetz directed himself in a production of *Hokus pokus* at the Lustspielhaus in Berlin. By the time the Republic collapsed, the comedy had seen over 2,000 performances in scores of theatres.

While *Hokus pokus* may to an extent resemble a Coward play, it parodies Pirandello—a fact which, after Pirandello won the Nobel Prize in 1934, became an important factor for middle-class non-intellectual audience appeal in the Third Reich. Such audiences wanted to boast familiarity with the Italian playwright, but they usually did not care to attend productions

2. Curt Goetz in *Hokus pokus*. Courtesy of the Theatre Collection, University of Cologne, Institute for Theatre, Film, and Television.
of his sometimes confusing plays. *Hokuspokus* thus allowed them to feel urbane and sophisticated without having to put forth much mental effort. In the opening prologue, a producer laments to a poet that he has not had a recent hit. The poet informs the producer that he has just come across a play by an Italian named “Miramdeller,” which is bound to be box office dynamite. The poet starts to read the play, which cues a scene change to begin the play’s first act. In a courtroom, a woman is on trial for the death of her husband, a failed painter who has disappeared. Since his death, however, his paintings have begun to sell and he has become an “overnight sensation.” The widow has begun to attract suitors, since she in turn has become wealthy.

One of these suitors is a man named Peer Bille, who in fact is her husband. Bille and his wife had been rowing on a lake, he tells the court; they quarreled, and their boat overturned. They both swam to shore safely; he accompanied her to the nearby train station to catch the train back home. When he went back to locate the boat, he could not find it, and so he caught the last train back into town. But we was so exhausted from the day’s exertions that he slept through the stop at his station and woke up five stations later, in another city. When he awoke, he saw a circus train parked on a siding and impulsively decided to join the circus. He was gone for seven months without a trace. When he returned to his wife, she told him of his recent “success” on the art market. They both decided on the “hokuspokus” of his death to prolong the mystery of his disappearance and to stimulate demand for his paintings.

The trial judge cannot decide whom to believe, since Peer Bille cannot effectively prove he is indeed the newly successful painter; the prosecution, on the other hand, cannot produce the *corpus delicti*. The judge declares a mistrial and releases the prisoner, as the lights fade back to the play’s epilogue. The poet reveals that the play’s author is not “Miramdeller” after all but himself—to whom the producer suggests suicide as a means to ensure the success of his play, as the curtain falls.

There may be some disagreement among scholars as to whether this play resembles anything by Noël Coward, but among German audiences there was little debate about its dissimilarity to the work of Hans Sachs or Ferdinand Raimund, the two exemplars of playwriting virtue which the new regime had sought to uphold in 1933. With the continued popularity of *Hokuspokus* and his other plays, by 1938 Goetz found himself championed as a kind of paradigm for German comedy. When a three-volume set of his plays was published in that year, for example, the Nazi Party organ *Völkischer Beobachter* devoted a glowing half-page review to it, noting that Germany could boast its own “universal genius” like Coward or Sacha Guitry in France. These were men, the reviewer stated, who wrote, directed, and starred in plays and films they produced, and only recently could the achievements of Goetz be recognized and appreciated. “Humor requires tranquil times,” wrote the reviewer, and “the past five years had been so dedicated to bringing order out of chaos” that only recently could the German theatre “reap the harvest it had sown in revolution, a harvest of well deserved laughter, a
broad, confident laughter that flatters no countenance better than it does the German." The German laughs best, he said, at the kind of wit Goetz possessed; he described it as “rapier sharp,” but one that did not wound deeply. Goetz was furthermore blessed with the ability to “apply a soothing balm after the needful blow had been struck, promoting healing and health.” In other words, Curt Goetz practiced “laughter, the best medicine,” combined with a mysterious analgesic called “hokuspokus” to get it “speeding into the bloodstream.”

To achieve such official acclaim Goetz had continued to direct and star in comedies he had written during the Weimar Republic and take them on tour. They were contained in the three volumes described above, and while none of them achieved the popularity of Hokuspokus, they provided him and his wife (the actress Valerie von Martens, his frequent co-star in the plays) an extremely comfortable living on their estate in Switzerland on Lake Thun. They were Der Lügner und die Nonne (The Liar and the Nun) and Dr. med. Hiob Praetorius (Job Praetorius, M.D.).

Like Hokuspokus before it, The Liar and the Nun gave Goetz an opportunity to treat the slippery quality of truth. It also begins with a prologue, and the story told by a young man turns into the play. He tells of a baby thought to have been born of a nun and of the investigation used to determine the baby’s real parents. The nun claims she found it on the convent’s doorstep and kept it in her room, thinking it was a gift from God. The mother supe-
rior accuses the nun of actually giving birth to the baby, so the nun decides to drown herself. A young man conveniently rescues her, however (the young man telling the story, in fact) just before she jumps into the swift currents of a river. In the course of the inquiry, the nun and the young man fall in love, and the baby’s father turns out to be the bishop of the local diocese, who to his profound embarrassment is also the presiding judge during the investigation.

*Job Praetorius, M.D.* likewise involved a kind of investigation, featuring the title character as a sympathetic gynecologist. It also contained an intriguing prologue (as in the earlier plays) in addition to an epilogue, both featuring Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson. Their task was to investigate the death of the eponymous gynecologist, whose professional goal had been to find “the microbes of human stupidity” and to develop a vaccination against them. Praetorius’ practice grows substantially as the play progresses, his services are in great demand, and the recovery rate of his patients is high. His colleagues, meantime, grow intensely jealous of him. He is killed in a car wreck because, as Holmes and Watson determine, “he was distracted by laughter and lost control of his motor vehicle.”

What explains the popularity of such plays, especially among German audiences during one of the most turbulent and barbarous periods in their history? One can partially understand the plays’ popularity among middle-class, non-intellectual audiences in Berlin, especially in the Weimar period,
who developed a taste for "cultivated" comedy, a taste which one could at least in part describe as a Germanized form of Coward's bonhomie and alacrity. But why would Goetz and his comedies remain so popular in the Hitler regime, especially after influential Nazis had condemned them? One reason was economic: theatre managers had to pay their bills in the Third Reich, as theatre managers have nearly always had to do. Plays like Hokus pokus, The Liar and the Nun, and Job Praetorius, M.D. created traffic at the box office, a tendency the new regime was eager to promote. Subsidies for theatre in the Third Reich came from an entertainment tax included in the price of all theatre tickets; thus a play with wide appeal could support less appealing plays with an approved ideological message, but which could not generate as many admissions.

A second reason was political. While Goetz was by no means a Nazi or even a Nazi sympathizer, his plays posed no threat to the regime; and besides, as Hermann Goering once proclaimed, "It is always easier to make a respectable National Socialist out of a great artist than it is to make a great artist out of a small party member." Did Nazis like Goering hope they could turn Goetz into one of their own? If not, they certainly recognized that his work could be useful to them; they could claim at least a portion of his popularity, along with an urbanity which counterpoised their insistence on Heimatkunst (Hearth and Home Art) in comedies elsewhere on German stages.

The most important reason for Goetz's popularity in Nazi Germany, however, and the one which presents the most historical significance, is the fact that even Nazis were capable of innocent laughter. A prevalent, and mistaken perception among most people, especially in the English-speaking world, is that "German comedy" is in the first place an oxymoron. The fact is that slightly more than 42,000 productions were staged between 1933 and 1944 in the Third Reich, and the majority of them were comedies. The idea of performing comedy, and performing that much comedy, during one of the most systematic reigns of terror the world has ever known may at first blush seem somewhat perverse, yet the capacity for a manipulative criminal like Goebbels or a sadistic butcher like Goering to take pleasure in the theatre (the way many people do) is highly instructive. An anecdote such as the following helps to explicate this point, the kind of lesson theatre history offers to history in general.

The French playwright Jacques Deval (1890–1972) had with Goetz written Towarisch, a comedy about Russian emigrants. It premiered in the Berlin Komödienhaus on 4 January 1935, with Goetz in the leading role and Goebbels in attendance. Goebbels was enmeshed at the time in the Winterhilfe scandal, a government-sponsored scam that involved collecting donations to help poor people buy winter clothing and find adequate housing. Rumor had it that much of the funds collected lined the pockets of Party bigwigs like Goebbels and Goering. There was a reference to "collections" in the play which everyone in the cast dreaded, due to Goebbels' presence on opening night. When the "collections" scene was played, there was a "deadly silence" in the house—but Goebbels suddenly started applauding, and the
audience exploded in cheers, “the most dangerous applause ever experienced in the theatre.” Towarisch continued its run at the Komödienhaus with Goetz in the cast for one hundred more performances. It then went on to ninety-one subsequent productions, making it one of the more popular comedies in the history of the Third Reich.

Two weeks after the premiere, Deval journeyed to Prague, where he denounced Germany’s racial policies. That prompted an immediate inquiry by the Propaganda Ministry, culminating in a demand to see Deval’s Arierachweis, or certificate of Aryan heritage; without it, bureaucrats told Goetz, they would close Towarisch down immediately. Goetz knew Deval was Jewish, and so did authorities in the Propaganda Ministry; no certificate of Aryan heritage would be forthcoming, but Goetz replied to the Propaganda Ministry in a one-sentence letter:

“Sirs:
Jacques Deval is a Frenchman, therefore an Aryan.

Sincerely yours,
Curt Goetz.”

It was not exactly an act of heroism, though such defiance could have cost Goetz a lengthy trial and even a prison sentence. At any rate, Goetz heard nothing more from the Propaganda Ministry until four years later, when on 29 November 1939, an anti-German film for which Deval had written the screenplay (titled Lorelei) opened in New York. It was denounced in the German press, but that could not stop the success of Towarisch, which by 1939 had fully established itself in the repertoires of most German theatres. Goebbels’ Propaganda Ministry quietly permitted continued production of Towarisch, but only under Goetz’s name.
The episode demonstrated something about Curt Goetz that, in historical retrospect, exceeds and perhaps even transcends considerations of politics or economics. It was a remarkable ability to charm his audience, even if members of that audience had the power of life and death over him. In German this capacity is sometimes called Narrenfreiheit, or “fool’s freedom,” referring to the “freedom” a court jester enjoys to ridicule his king. Goetz himself best described the ability he possessed in the inscription of the aforementioned (and much praised) three-volume anthology of his works, which took the form of an epitaph:

I had a lot of fun in life, and since it’s over and I’m dead,
What I guess I had to say, I guess I sort of said.27

Goetz was no fool, but what he had to say possessed the mysterious capacity somehow to disarm as well as to charm. There was always a “whiff of champagne in the air” when he was on stage, according to one newspaper critic,28 a kind of perfume that was ephemeral but concomitantly able to convince even the most impassioned of political partisans that they were in the presence of rare and irreplaceable wizardry. It allowed Goetz to avoid the insolence of office permeating the powers and principalities in the Third Reich, and it also is final testimony to the comedy he created and the kind of comic persona he projected, to audiences and to tyrants alike.

NOTES

2. Primary sources documenting unprecedented levels of theatre subsidy during the Third Reich are located in the Federal Archives in Coblenz. Newly opened archives in Potsdam, formerly in the German Democratic Republic, corroborate Coblenz-based studies which established in the 1960s that national subvention of theatre was a matter of state policy. In early 1934, for example, Business Director of the Reich Theatre Chamber Eduard Frauenfeld declared, “All German theatres have finally become state theatres,” according to Joseph Wulf, Theatre und Film im dritten Reich (Gutersloh: Mohn, 1964), 38. Wulf provided a statistical appraisal of Frauenfeld’s assertion; by 1936, for example, there were 299 theatre operations in Germany, and of them twenty-seven were touring companies; ninety-one were small profit-oriented enterprises. The remaining 181 companies played permanently in 207 houses. All received financial support from the Reich Propaganda Ministry, the first such national government agency in German history, and the first of its kind to provide nationwide support of the arts.
4. Walter K. G. Best, Volksische Dramaturgie (Würzburg: 1940), 92. The following is the original statement in German, an excellent example of tendentious Nazi cultural doctrine: “[Diese Komödien] haben dem volksischen Bestand enormen Schaden zugefügt...weil sie lebenserhaltende Werte dem wiehernden Gelächter preisgaben.”
5. Theatre attendance tripled between 1932 and 1936, according to Boguslaw Drewniak in his Das Theater im NS-Staat (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1983), 44. Over 57% of the tickets sold were to productions of comedies, the like of which came initially under suspicion because they closely resembled comedies popular in the Weimar Republic.
6. Joachim C. Fest, *Das Gesicht des Dritten Reiches: Profile einer totalitärer Herren (Munich: R. Piper, 1963), 170. One of Fest’s many “profiles” in this book is Alfred Rosenberg, the “Forgotten Disciple” and most insistently of all the early “true believers” in National Socialism’s cultural mission. Rosenberg set up the *Kampfbund für Deutsche Kultur* (League of Struggle for German Culture) in 1929 “with a view to the establishment of racially oriented criteria of aesthetics, from which his offensive against the ‘bastardized mestizoism’ of so-called degenerate art would be enforced by the state.”


8. *It’s a Gift* premiered in March of 1945 at the Playhouse Theatre in New York City.

9. Immanuel Reicher (1849–1924) was one of the greatest actors of his age, best known for his work with Otto Brahm and the Freie Bühne in Berlin, of which he was an original member. He was a cast member in several Gerhart Hauptmann world premieres, and later worked for Max Reinhardt in the years before World War I.

10. The term “boulevard” is by no means a pejorative in this context. Berlin had a flourishing commercial theatre in the pre-World War I era, and Barnowsky was one of over a dozen director/managers whose taste, style, and accomplishment contributed significantly to Berlin’s status as a world theatre capital.


13. Bernard Shaw’s *Letters to Siegfried Trebitsch*, ed. Samuel Weiss (Palo Alto: Stanford Univ. Press, 1986), 7. “After the Great War, German-language theatre opened up to foreign-language plays; its hundreds of subsidized houses had a tradition of preference for “light, sentimental fare in tandem with the classics.” Before the war, court theatres and municipal theatres leased to a private manager were in the majority. Private theatres, especially in Berlin, proliferated. In 1902, Shaw “granted Trebitsch exclusive rights to negotiate with any German-language theatre on his behalf—although there was never a written contract between them.”

14. Herbert Ihering, quoted in Günther Rühle, *Theater für die Republik* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer), 659.


18. Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson had been fixtures on the German stage since 1907, when the producer/manager Ferdinand Bonn had presented *Der Hund der Baskervilles* (The Hound of the Baskervilles) in Berlin to popular acclaim. Though Berlin’s critics regularly castigated him for what they considered his "pedestrian taste," Bonn’s theatre was a favorite among the German Imperial family, and the Kaiser himself attended *Der Hund der Baskervilles* and maintained a yearly subscription there. Nevertheless, Bonn said in his highly entertaining autobiography, *Mein Künstlerleben* (My Artistic Life, Munich: Huber, 1920), his Holmes/Watson potboilers “were exercises in dubious aesthetic discernment” (101). After his *Der Hund der Baskervilles* had reached the century mark in performances, he had posters printed up exclaiming, “To the shame of the German people, Sherlock Holmes now performed 100 times!” (105). Audiences continued to flock to the production, which outlasted the Kaiser himself, closing finally in 1920.

19. That phrase was originally to have been the play’s title, according to Goetz’s wife Valerie von Maartens, in *Das große Curt Goetz Album*, 35.

20. Wolf Bräumuller, “Das deutsche Theater 1934/35,” *Bausteine zum deutschen Nationaltheater* 6 (1935): 162: “If a theatre director can think of presenting nothing besides comedies [like those of Curt Goetz], then we haven’t wasted our time in replacing that theatre director.”


23. The most popular of the *Heimatkunst* comedies were those of August Hinrichs (1879–1956), who wrote originally in Low German; that gave his comedies a stamp of unarguable "authenticity" and “closeness to the soil.” His Wenn der Hahn kräht (When the Rooster Crows) had 182 productions and nearly 10,000 performances by 1944. It was a “rustic comedy” set in
a rural village with action concentrating on the hardy “folk.” His *Krach um Iolanthe* (Row over Iolanthe) was almost as popular, with 157 productions and over 9,000 performances. It was a barnyard comedy whose title character was a sow concealed from tax authorities to hide her market value.


27. "Ich habe mit dem Leben mich / Gefreut, gestritten, und geplagt, / Und was ich ungefähr zu sagen hatte / Das hab' ich ungefähr gesagt."