

The Theatrical Concession System in Prussia, 1811–1869

by William Grange

In 1869, the Prussian House of Deputies passed a law that transformed theatre practice in Berlin and other Prussian cities. When the newly unified Germany came into being two years later, the 1869 law became the legal order of business for all theatres within the new Reich. That law, called the *Gewerbefreiheit Gesetz* (Freedom to Engage in Business Act), put an end to the way theatre had formerly been produced, dissolving the concession system that had been in operation for decades previous; it also terminated a tradition that had functioned for centuries, both in Prussia and in nearly all other German-speaking states. Yet few students of the German theatre—not to mention students of the theatre in general—are familiar with the concession system, ramifications of the 1869 law that discontinued it, nor with conditions prior to 1869 contributing to the law's enactment. This essay is an attempt to provide historical scrutiny to, and broader familiarity with, personalities and procedures involved in nineteenth-century Prussian theatre production during the decades preceding formation of the Wilhelmine Empire. The 1869 law initiated widespread revision of the way artists and managers created theatre, but it also codified economic realities which, in several instances, were already in place, particularly in Berlin. The decades leading up to the 1869 law had witnessed Prussian officialdom's ineffectual attempts to stimulate theatre production. Economic development interfered with those attempts, and the 1869 law was essentially a signal that private enterprise and public taste had triumphed over aristocratic privilege and the dictation of taste. That is not to confirm in any way, however, that economic factors determined public taste—though one is tempted to cite Marx and Engels in the process. Engels specifically condemned the 1869 law as “just one more attempt by Germans to bring about a bourgeois republic” and thereby impose a bourgeois ideology on German audiences.¹ That argument is flawed, as Mark Bauerlein has noted, “since nobody ever sees the creation of an ideology, much less sees it imposed.” An ideology, furthermore, is not a set of concrete ideas but a vague framework of assumptions within which individuals think. Those individuals, according to Marxist analysis, “are usually blind and deluded, complacent and the unwitting accomplices of various social and political structures that support intellectual privilege.” Was that the case in Prussia from 1811 to 1869? Only an ideological critic would know, one somehow convinced that “dominant eco-

conomic forces announce their ideology as a new idea, their intellectual intentions emerging from an ideological framework.”²

The Privilege and Prussian “De-feudalization”

The concession system in Prussia was roughly analogous to the patent system that operated in England from the Restoration in 1660 to the Theatre Regulation Act of 1843. Like the English patents, Prussian concessions were supposed to grant a monopoly on spoken drama to favored managers. In Prussia, however, the favored manager was not a businessman but the *Intendant*, or supervising director, of the Royal Theatre in Berlin. The “Royal Theatre” in Berlin had successively been called the *Königliches Nationaltheater*, the *Königliches Schauspiele-Schauspielhaus*, and finally the *Königliches Schauspielhaus* under a series of Prussian aristocrats since the death of actor/manager August Wilhelm Iffland (1749–1814). The first of those aristocrat managers was Count Karl Brühl, who ran the Royal Theatre from 1815 to 1828; his successor was Count Wilhelm Friedrich Reder, 1829 to 1842; then came Karl Theodor von Küstner from 1842 to 1851, followed by Count Botho von Hülsen, who ran the theatre until 1886. During his administration the most significant changes in Prussian theatre practice took place, including the enactment of the aforementioned Freedom to Engage in Business Act.

The first significant modification of theatre’s position in Prussian statute law came in 1811, when Iffland was still the Royal Theatre’s supervising director. The 1811 law revamped customary nomenclature for theatre practice and was part of reform legislation that followed in the wake of Napoleon’s victory over Prussian forces at the battle of Jena in 1806. Of considerably more catastrophic consequence for Prussia were provisions of the Treaties of Tilsit, which Napoleon forced Prussia to accept in 1807. The terms of those treaties obliged Prussia to cede half its territory to Napoleon, who then used it to create the “Kingdom of Westphalia” for his brother, Jerome. Napoleon also compelled Prussia to join his “Continental System” that closed European ports to British vessels, to reduce the size of the Prussian army by half, and to allow French occupation of Prussian fortifications until the Prussian king paid off massive war reparations (in the amount of 120 million gold francs). Defeat had also resulted in temporary French occupation of Berlin and the subjugation of many Prussian cultural entities, including the Royal Theatre. The French had renamed it “*La Société dramatique et Lyrique Allemande de son majesté le Roi*.”³ The Prussians were forced to endure that French name for their theatre until 1808, but the effects of military defeat, economic subjugation, and cultural dilution were principal factors in the enactment of the 1811 reforms. The reforms granted an unprecedented degree of autonomy to Prussian towns and the final emancipation of serfs, but most significant for theatre practice were measures that removed numerous state restrictions on investment, marketing, and employment in an attempt to stimulate the Prussian economy and pay

off war reparations. Those measures were supposed to “modernize,” or at least “de-feudalize” the way theatre troupes conducted themselves in Prussia. This essay employs a methodological strategy to examine those modernizing and “de-feudalizing” efforts in ways that have come to be called, in some scholarly precincts, “cultural poetics,” since it wishes to make theatre history more understandable. The discussions that follow present history, particularly Prussian history, as a “complex network of representations, social forces, and material contingencies” that help the reader “to perceive human beings in a web of significance.”⁴ Cultural poetics, however, usually chooses to examine culture as “an assemblage of texts,” whereas the examinations here will deal chiefly with social, economic, and political mechanics. As epistemological analysis, this essay likewise asserts that Prussian history from 1811 to 1869 was actually going somewhere. There was nothing random in the development of the concession system during those years; there were specific reasons for everything that happened. Thus the discussions here concern culture as a dynamic construct, yet they are grounded in an inert set of facts.

One such set of facts was the obligation of theatre troupes before 1811 to maintain a practice held over from the Middle Ages. That practice obligated them to apply for a *Privileg*, literally a privilege, to the court in whose jurisdiction they wished to perform. According to established protocol, the ruler then “conceded” his permission for performances in his domain. Touring troupes had made such applications for centuries previous, but after 1811 theatre troupes officially became businesses who fell under the supervision of local law enforcement authorities. The law read, in part: “Theatre directors may do business only with the approval of general police authorities. The instrument of authorization shall specifically state time and location of performance, for which that instrument shall be valid.”⁵ The “instrument of authorization” (a *Gewerbeschein*, or business license) was to replace the *Privileg* with bureaucratically administered regulation. As businesses, theatre troupes were no longer to be considered the fortunate beneficiaries of a ruler’s munificence. They were henceforth like any other business, subject to a number of guidelines, restrictions, and prohibitions. The 1811 law thus intended to do more than simply redefine theatre practice; it was to create a new atmosphere in which anyone wishing to do theatre business within Prussia could conceivably prosper. Established practices, however, proved difficult to dislodge. Theatre troupes in Prussia, as in Germany as a whole, had historically been either court residents with ceremonial functions or touring groups who played in larger towns and cities. The former were sometimes called into being by an aristocratic ruler, but most were former touring troupes who had received court appointments. The latter had established themselves in municipal venues but frequently continued to tour. As John Osborne has noted, some rulers “had even built playhouses for their resident companies or they were absorbed into the existing court companies which in most cases were doing opera and French neo-classical tragedies and comedies.”⁶ By the end of the eigh-

teenth century, Osborne concluded, most of the former, whose founders had included Caroline Neuber (1697–1760), Konrad Ernst Ackermann (1712–71), Konrad Ekhof (1720–78),⁷ Gottfried Heinrich Koch (1703–75), Abel Seyler (1730–1800) and their descendants, “had settled into permanent status somewhere.” Those troupes, such as Iffland’s in Berlin, remained desirous of aristocratic protection from competition.

The 1811 law continued to protect Iffland’s company, along with other court troupes and (to a certain extent) municipal theatres, but it had objectives beyond merely “de-feudalizing” and protecting theatre practice. The 1811 law was part of what Gerhard Ritter called the attempt by Prussian King Friedrich Wilhelm III (1770–1840) and his advisors to emulate what Napoleon had already accomplished in France: “transforming a community that had rested on a merely cultural basis into one with a political will, a self-conscious national state...[that was] inordinately concerned with its external prestige.”⁸ Prussian officials were certainly concerned with prestige, and granting private theatre enterprise the status of business legitimacy was one way to accomplish the transformation Ritter described. Doing so brought the added benefit of placing the nasty business of censorship in the hands of the *Gewerbepolizei*, or commerce police, whose charge was to make sure no theatre enterprise would engage in “subversive activity.”⁹ Yet regulating and policing theatre enterprise was an established practice long before 1811; the new law simply smeared on a layer of fresh makeup, attached a new wig, and stitched up the already threadbare costume of the creature that was government censorship and control. Theatre managers like Karl Theophilus Döbbelin (1727–93) had wrestled with that creature when he established the precedent of private theatre enterprise in Berlin prior to the Napoleonic wars, and, indeed, Döbbelin had secured a *Privileg* to situate himself and his company on a semi-permanent basis. He did so initially at the Theater am Monjoubiplatz in 1769, and remained there until 1777.¹⁰ Gottfried Heinrich Koch had secured a similar *Privileg* in 1771 when he occupied the Theater in der Behrenstrasse. Those two venues were the only ones available in Berlin for theatre performance after the 1811 law went into effect. The law was to stimulate theatre business, but that endeavor became profoundly difficult when Napoleon invaded Russia in 1812. Napoleon conscripted Prussian troops for the invasion, used Prussian territory to launch it, and, ultimately, ensnared Prussia in a destructive economic squeeze through his embargo of German ports. The result was a severe constriction of market growth and a corresponding reduction in overall business activity.

Napoleon’s defeat at the Battle of the Nations near Leipzig in 1813 freed Prussia of French domination, and theatre activity in Berlin blossomed—in the summers, at any rate. Several restaurateurs opened “summer gardens” after 1813 and presented numerous musical entertainments and comedy skits. In 1819, however, the “Carlsbad Decrees” went into effect, which specified increased censorship and police supervision of theatre activities in Prussia and all of the North German territories.¹¹ The Carlsbad

Decrees understandably did little to stimulate theatre as a business enterprise, and in all likelihood they served to dampen it. Yet rulers, courtiers, and politicians alike recognized by 1819 that theatre was not merely a source of amusement for an elite, well-educated sector of society. It had the potential to become “an opinion-forming institution and thus required police control—especially in the post-Congress of Vienna thinking that prevailed amongst most rulers and their courtiers.”¹²

*The Königstädtisches Theater and the
Kroll'sche Etablissement, 1820–1848*

Two important theatre enterprises came into being between 1820 and the revolutionary unrest of 1848. Both were significant by virtue of their survival in the face of economic difficulties, and both were to have an impact on the growth of subsequent theatre enterprise in Berlin. The first was the Königstädtisches Theater am Alexanderplatz, for which a horse dealer named Friedrich Cerf had received a concession on 13 May 1822. Why Cerf received the concession is not entirely clear, but in 1821 Prussian courtiers secured a concession from the Prussian *Hofmarschall* (a kind of Lord Chamberlain) and had convinced Prussian King Friedrich Wilhelm III to support the idea of a *Volkstheater*, or a venue dedicated almost exclusively to popular entertainment. Friedrich Wilhelm III may indeed have been the instigator of the idea in the first place, since he had attended *Volkstheater* in Vienna during the Congress of Vienna and later in Paris. Given that Friedrich Wilhelm did enjoy the superficial banality on offer in Vienna and Paris, the king's goals may not have been altogether altruistic—a venue to provide the citizens of his capital, himself included, with opportunities for laughter. It was the kind of fare woefully lacking at the time in Berlin: vaudevilles, gymnastics, magic acts, musical diversions, and pretty girls on display. Many experienced and well-traveled theatre managers had applied to the Prussian crown for permission to produce that kind of theatre in Berlin, but they had been refused. Why then did the Prussian crown bestow such a lucrative favor upon Friedrich Cerf, who in addition to being illiterate, had no experience as a theatre manager, and indeed before receiving the concession had never before even lived in Berlin? No one knows for sure.

It is known that Cerf had been active in Dessau's equine commerce markets from 1802 to 1811, a time of military conflict when cavalry mounts and draught animals were in great demand. Cerf is thought to have been an active dealer among the Russian troops in their campaigns against Napoleon and had been particularly helpful between 1813 and 1815. One Russian procurement officer in particular with whom he dealt was General von Sayn-Wittgenstein-Ludwigsburg, a relative of the Prussian Minister of the Royal Household Prince von Sayn-Wittgenstein-Hohenstein, a close personal friend and advisor to King Friedrich Wilhelm III. Friedrich Cerf and his heirs received the concession in 1822 for ninety-nine years at the the-

atre on Alexanderplatz, with the understanding that the theatre's repertoire would be restricted to popular entertainment.

The facility itself was located only a mile east of the Royal Opera House on Berlin's royal boulevard, Unter den Linden. The Königstädtisches Theater am Alexanderplatz seated 1500 patrons in an elaborately decorated auditorium, and King Friedrich Wilhelm III attended ceremonies opening the building in 1824. The first season featured 115 new programs of entertainment, which sometimes included not only vaudevilles and musical diversions, but also farces of either French or Viennese provenance. Despite its links to the Prussian throne and the novelty of its repertoire, expenses for so many new programs threatened to put Cerf out of business before he could begin his second season. A coincidence of unforeseen circumstance intervened in June 1825, however, when the German-language performance rights to Gioacchino Antonio Rossini's opera, *The Italian Girl in Algiers*, were released. Normally the Berlin Royal Opera would have secured the rights and given the opera its German-language premiere. But the Royal Opera's repertoire was booked through the remainder of the year, so the Königstädtisches Theater was allowed to give Rossini's opera its German premiere production, with the added benefit of celebrated Viennese soprano Henriette Sontag in the title role. The German premiere of *The Italian Girl in Algiers* took place 3 August 1825 and proved to be the theatre's financial savior.¹³

The second theatre to establish itself in Berlin before the 1848 revolution was the "Kroll'sche Etablissement," which began as a beer garden near Königsplatz. Its owner, Joseph Kroll (1798–1848) began doing entertainments there based on his experience as a restaurateur during the 1830s in Breslau, where the Prussian Crown Prince Friedrich Wilhelm (before his accession to the Prussian throne as Friedrich Wilhelm IV in 1840) had been a guest at his Breslau establishment called the Wintergarten. Kroll capitalized on his royal connections when the new king deeded Berlin property to him near the Brandenburg gate. Kroll then commissioned architects Ludwig Persius and Carl Ferdinand Langhans to erect a complex of three large halls on the property, one of which was to serve as a theatre. Kroll's artistic standards were reportedly "very low," though Kroll had the distinction of welcoming King Friedrich Wilhelm IV as a guest in his theatre on numerous occasions. As a result of the king's patronage, the public's interest in Kroll's product increased to the point that his business began to expand and he was allowed to present "couplets," or operetta-like productions with recognizable Berlin types as the main characters.

Perhaps because of the crown's interest in such fare, and the recognition that the 1811 law had not produced the desired expansion in theatre business, the Prussian House of Deputies in January 1845 passed an amendment governing theatre practice. This was the *Konzessionerteilung Gesetz*, or Concession Allowance Law, which granted concessions to producers providing they met specific legal criteria and declaring all income from their efforts taxable. The law required that "theatre operators

(*Schauspielunternehmer*, as they were now called in distinction to *Schauspieldirektoren*, or “theatre directors” in the 1811 usage) shall require special permission of the highest police authorities of the province(s) in which they wish to give their performances. This permission shall be granted only after the appropriate dependability and requisite training have been established, and other conditions have been met, to the satisfaction of said authorities.” The new law gave authorities more flexibility; “other conditions having been met” usually meant that concessionaires agreed to restrictions on genre, length of run, and admission prices. Thus the Prussian Royal Theatre remained protected, but concessions were somewhat easier to receive, provided the applicant could demonstrate the promise of revenue-generating and tax-paying ticket sales. If the 1811 reform law was intended to re-make the *Privileg* into a “concession” by essentially giving a new name to an old practice, then the 1845 law repeated the same fallacy—though with similar bureaucratic “refinements” that were supposed to “streamline” the application process and endow the process of starting a theatre with Prussian efficiency. The 1845 law dispensed with the requirement of stating specific time and location of performances, plus it eased somewhat the traditional restrictions on genre. Playwrights were now permitted to inject into vaudeville sketches portions of dialogue, while producers were permitted to produce contemporary comedies provided they received permission from the Royal Theatre.

Behind the passage of all such Prussian restrictions on theatre lay a legal tradition that regarded theatre as a potential threat to “domestic tranquility,” and court officials frequently cited precedents justifying a visible police presence at most performances. The Hapsburgs in Vienna and the Wittelsbachs in Munich, as well as the Hohenzollerns in Berlin made pronouncements about guaranteeing the validity of theatre by keeping “vulgarity and disrespectful expressions at a genteel remove from the public stage.”¹⁴ One of the most famous episodes that these jurists frequently cited as a precedent was the world premiere of Friedrich Schiller’s *Die Räuber* on 13 January 1781, at the Mannheim Hof- und Nationaltheater. One witness testified that the theatre resembled a “madhouse, as rolling eyes, clenched fists, stamping feet and hoarse shrieks filled the auditorium. Total strangers fell weeping into each others’ arms, and women staggered to the exits, bidding fair to faint on the spot. It was a general outbreak of chaos....”¹⁵ As cities grew, municipal officials enacted similar regulations that reinforced the precedent of official supervision. In Hamburg, “faintings upon faintings” at a performance of *Othello* had disrupted proceedings to a disagreeable extent, as “ladies in box seats who had fainted had to be carried out.” In Vienna, Hapsburg officials recognized that the most important approach to theatre jurisdiction was to “preserve tranquility by the exclusion of whatsoever may excite doubt, discontent, discussion or comparison.”¹⁶ The Prussians had historically implemented policies based on similar viewpoints. Prussian Minister of the Interior Count Schwerin during the reign of Friedrich Wilhelm IV, however, regarded the practice of theatre-going by the general

public as “highly suspicious” to begin with. “The theatre,” he once stated, was best advised to “become a sugar-coated pill which the people may swallow as their mouths open in laughter at what they witness on the stage.”¹⁷ As Interior Minister, Schwerin had to deal with petitioners who approached him with various entreaties to stage performances in locations for the general public outside the royal precincts of Berlin.

The first theatre to open after the passage of the 1845 law was the Schwarzer Adler (the “Black Eagle”) in Schöneberg, where vaudeville-style entertainments predominated. At the Schwarzer Adler, the comedian and playwright David Kalisch made his debut.¹⁸ Soon thereafter a second theatre opened in Schöneberg, namely Callenbachs Theater at the Henning’schen Lokal near Oranienburger Tor, where owner Carli Callenbach featured the comedian and singer Karl Helmerding. Both the Schwarzer Adler and Callenbachs prospered until the spring of 1848, when revolutionary unrest prompted Prussian authorities to close them. The revolutionary fervor that swept through Berlin in March of 1848 is a subject far too enormous to examine in detail here, but one should note that the general sentiment favoring a loosening of censorship, encouraging individual rights, and promoting variety in the repertoire had a prosperous effect on theatre practice, at least when the political upheavals began to subside.

Revolution in 1848 and Theatre’s Economic Significance

In a curious and almost comical sense, the revolutionary events of 1848 (and the Prussian hierarchy’s reactions to them) reflected official attempts to regulate theatre since 1811. The “revolution” began in March when Friedrich Wilhelm IV issued a proclamation promising to sign a constitution and consenting to freedom of the press. Crowds gathered outside the *Stadtschloss*, or city palace in Berlin, as a public demonstration of their gratitude. The Prussian army mistook the crowd’s good intentions and began firing on them as they approached the inner courtyard of the palace. Several of the king’s loyal subjects were killed and wounded, which led to calls for a violent overthrow of the Prussian monarchy; several revolutionary groups threw up barricades in Berlin streets, the way French revolutionaries had done in 1830. Friedrich Wilhelm IV quickly issued another proclamation, this time apologizing to “my dear Berliners” with additional assurances of allowing universal suffrage (for men only) to elect a new united parliament, and to form a civilian government made up of liberals dedicated to individual rights. As with earlier attempts at reform, efforts to promote democracy in Prussia fell far short of hopes and expectations.¹⁹ Those efforts failed for many of the same reasons that theatre reform had foundered, because any attempt “to loosen censorship or encourage individual rights were anathema to Prussian elites” who surrounded the king.²⁰ Moves toward democratically elected government proved likewise unsavory to the Prussian Establishment. By 1850, a new Prussian parliament came into being, but it had little real executive power. The king’s ministers con-

tinued as they had before to dominate and effectively to determine not only the course of theatre activity in Prussia, but to maintain their feudal privileges and their hold on the levers of political power.

Their hold on economic power, however, was slipping. Just as the concessions issued to coal mining operators in Prussian-controlled Silesia and the Ruhr Valley started to generate enormous profits by 1848, so theatre concessions in Berlin began to realize some of their economic potential. After 1848, authorities were inclined to grant concessions to theatre managers more liberally than they had been heretofore. In 1849 Louis Gräbert opened his Volkstheater in Moabit and the Kroll'sche Etablissement, already profitable, was allowed to begin doing operas and one-act comedies in the summer of 1850. One of the most significant concessions in the aftermath of the 1848 revolution, however, went to Friedrich Wilhelm Deichmann (1821–79) to run an outdoor garden theatre he called the “Kasino in der Schumann Strasse.” It was not a casino, but a dance bar with entertainment. In November of 1848 Deichmann opened a winter garden theatre, meaning it was enclosed against the natural elements. How Deichmann received his concession remains, like the facts surrounding any theatre manager who received a concession, a subject of some dispute. Hans Knudsen credited it to Deichmann's intelligence work for the Prussian government on trips to France in the 1840s. There is little record of espionage work Deichmann undertook in France, but correspondence with Prussian diplomatic officials reveals his connections to Prussian officialdom, giving rise to speculation that he had been somehow useful. It did not hurt Deichmann's cause, as Knudsen noted, that he was on record as “an enemy of any revolutionary sympathies.”²¹ Deichmann sought to imitate the vaudeville theatres he had seen in Paris on the Boulevard du Temple. Those theatres had “comedies with song” on offer, providing actors the opportunity to display singing ability in combination with comic flair.

One of the most important actors whom Deichmann employed at his theatre was Theodor L'Arronge. L'Arronge was to have an illustrious career in the German-language theatres of New York City during the 1850s and 1860s,²² but his mastery of the “couplet” form and the *Lokalposse*, or local farce-comedy, began with Deichmann. The local farce comedy had its roots as a genre in Vienna in the work of Adolf Bäuerle and Johann Nepomuk Nestroy (its most famous and accomplished Viennese practitioner), but northern German playwrights like Carl Malss in Frankfurt and Ernst Elias Nebergall in Düsseldorf were noted for developing it as well. The *Lokalposse* dealt farcically with local themes and characters, with a liberal admixture of local references and topical allusions.²³ Gottfried Keller witnessed L'Arronge and others in productions he saw at Deichmann's theatre in Berlin and saw the emergence of what he considered an anti-elitist dramatic form, “giving the lies to literary sleeping caps who maintain that there is no poetic or lasting worth in treating the daily activities in the lives of ordinary people on the stage.”²⁴

The Berlin *Lokalposse* at Deichmann's theatre, which he renamed (si-

multaneously for the Prussian king and himself) the Friedrich-Wilhelmstädtisches Theater, began a process that republican revolutionaries had sought for themselves and Prussians in general: a reduction of governmental control and a measure of individual independence. That independence was won, however, not with political action but through economic power. The Berlin *Lokalposse* began to make money for managers who copied Deichmann, since his concession did not entitle him to a monopoly over it. Since the *Lokalposse* was so popular, concessionaires like Carli Callenbach likewise made money with it at his theatre as did Louis Gräbert at his Vorstädtisches Theater in Zehdenicker Strasse when he received a concession in 1851; Rudolf Cerf (the son of Fredrich Cerf) bought the Zirkus Rentz on Charlotten Strasse and with a concession in 1852 renamed it the Neues Königstädtisches Theater. August Wilhelm Grieben received his concession in 1855 for the Königstädtisches Vaudeville-Theater in Blumen Strasse. In 1858, Franz Wallner (1810–76) bought that theatre and its concession. The following year Cerf built the Viktoria Theater on Münz Strasse with a new concession, having sold the Neues Königstädtisches Theater and its concession to F. G. Grosskopf, who renamed it the Spezialitäten Theater. All of these theatres paid tax on ticket sales, and by the end of the 1850s, Prussian officials recognized that a form of public entertainment with no literary pretensions, a script featuring contemporary characters, and melodies easily accessible to audiences had substantial revenue-producing potential.

A concession did not guarantee success, however, and not every *Lokalposse* was a hit. Deichmann tried to expand his repertoire by offering travelogues, musical evenings, and straight plays by Gutzkow and Freytag featuring famous actors like Friedrich Haase, Marie Seebach, and Bogumil Dawison, but he lost money on all of them except an 1855 dance extravaganza starring “The Spanish Firecracker,” Pepita de Oliva. Her show made so much money for Deichmann that he was able to cover the earlier debts he had incurred, but expenses he ran up trying to create another show for her forced him into bankruptcy by 1856. Late that year he spent four months in jail and was released in early 1857. The following year Deichmann’s luck suddenly changed with August Weirauch’s *Der Maschinenbauer von Berlin*—but that was just the beginning. Soon thereafter he secured the rights to Offenbach’s operettas and in June of that year he gave the German premiere of *Orpheus in Hell* (later changed to *Orpheus in the Underworld*). Deichmann subsequently did all of Offenbach’s operettas through the 1860s and became wealthy beyond his wildest dreams. In 1872 he sold his theatre for the then unheard-of sum of 1.6 million RM to a consortium,²⁵ on the proceeds he bought himself a large estate in Swinemünde and lived out his days taking walks along the Baltic seacoast.²⁶

Deichmann’s career as a pre-Wilhelmine concessionaire stands in curious dissimilarity to the aforementioned Franz Wallner, who arrived in Berlin with a troupe of actors and musicians in 1855. He already had extensive experience as a manager, running theatres in Freiburg, Baden-Baden, and

Posen. He had furthermore spent the 1845–46 season in Berlin as a lessee of the Königstädtisches Theater am Alexanderplatz. In that venue he had earned good notices on his productions of Viennese comedies by Raimund and Nestroy. Berliners had found in Wallner, himself a native Viennese, an amusing interpreter of those distinctive Austrian playwrights. As a teenager, Wallner had seen Nestroy in performance, and the experience had planted within his imagination the idea of developing an ensemble best suited to the plays of Raimund and Nestroy. Like Deichmann, he had visited Paris in the 1840s, but the impressions he got differed from Deichmann's. In the French capital he found himself fascinated by the ensemble acting he had witnessed, and upon his return to Germany he began to use "ensemble" as a byword for the troupes he led. That meant extensive rehearsals dedicated to character formation beyond the accepted typecasting of the day. In the green room of the Wallner Theater in Berlin was posted the following announcement: "The Management determines the repertoire and casts roles according to lines of business for which the artists are engaged, but also according to the relationships among characters, the artistic ability of individual artist, and for the best possible production values. No one shall have the right to refuse a role based upon line of business."²⁷ Franz Wallner was thus a prototype of the director Georg II who was to become at his court theatre in Meiningen two decades later. Wallner was also unlike most other concessionaires in Berlin like Deichmann, who were essentially entrepreneurs.

Wallner thought of himself as an artist first and a theatre manager second. When he arrived in Berlin in 1855, he felt that Berlin audiences were ready to appreciate the style of performance he had cultivated. He agreed to pay the sum of 2,000 Taler to August Wilhelm Grieben for the Königstädtisches Vaudeville-Theater in Blumen Strasse—even though Wallner himself had no operating capital.²⁸ He borrowed every groschen of that sum at a high interest rate against his anticipated box-office returns, using the concession awarded to Grieben as collateral. Yet his success was not immediate. Indeed Wallner's first efforts in September 1855 were poorly attended; the first evening under his administration brought in seventeen Taler, and the next night's receipts were even less. But one critic took notice. He stated that Wallner's actors "know their craft and present work suitable for a capital city."²⁹ Wallner was able to hang on through September 1855 until he opened the Berlin premiere of Dumas fils' *The Demi-monde* (under the title *Pariser Sitten*, or "Parisian Morals") on 11 October 1855. Officials at the Royal Theatre had refused *The Demi-monde* because of its problematic subject matter, thus allowing Wallner to produce it as "irregular drama." It was also irregular in the success it achieved, running for 52 performances, as audiences flocked to see it at the newly named "Wallner Theater." Wallner enjoyed even greater success a month later with *Camille* (titled in German *Die Dame mit den Camelien, oder eine neue Magdalena*, "The Lady with the Camelias, or a New Magdalen"), which ran for sixty-six performances.³⁰

Wallner realized, however, that the sensation surrounding *The Demi-monde* and *Camille* was because both plays were fashionably French “salon dramas.” He could not count on the Royal Theatre’s continued refusal of such plays, which allowed him to produce them. Wallner wanted to build the kind of audience base in Berlin he had witnessed in the Vienna of his youth, where the Carl Theater had offered a genuine “people’s theatre” that audiences supported regardless of a play’s notoriety. Wallner’s goal then became the discovery of a “Berlin voice” similar to the Viennese of either Raimund or Nestroy. He found the “voice of Berlin” in the person of the aforementioned David Kalisch, editor and cofounder of the satirical weekly *Kladderadatsch*.³¹ Kalisch had contributed lyrics to songs to *Münchhausen*, a vehicle for the well-known comedian Philipp Grobecker (1815–83), and Wallner had booked *Münchhausen* into his theatre for a brief run late in the 1856 season. The unexpected success of Kalisch’s couplets written for Grobecker convinced Wallner that Kalisch was the dramatist he had been seeking. In the years following, Kalisch became closely identified with Wallner; his first play under Wallner’s direction was *Aktienbudiker*, which premiered in 1856 and enabled Wallner to begin a profitable summer operation in the city’s Bouché Park, to obtain a concession in his own name, and ultimately to build his own new structure on a street the city named after him. The profitable association with Kalisch indeed marked Wallner as the preeminent manager in Berlin for the next dozen years. *Aktienbudiker* alone had 215 consecutive performances, the highest number of any production to that date in Berlin’s history.

A Royal Capitulation

By the 1860s, the director of the Royal Theatre, Count Botho von Hülsen, realized something that had escaped his illustrious predecessors at the Royal Theatre (Counts Karl Brühl, Wilhelm Friedrich Redern, and Karl Theodor von Küstner): dramatic material heretofore dismissed as unworthy to be produced at the king’s theatre was allowing concessionaires to make a great deal of money. Count von Hülsen, however, also recognized the futility of declaring plays like *Aktienbudiker* or the operettas of Offenbach “regular,” making them off-limits to concessionaires; Wallner, Deichmann, and the others furthermore paid substantial taxes on their income, a duty not required of him. The only option open to the Royal Theatre, von Hülsen correctly perceived, was to begin competing with the concessionaires, openly admitting he was doing so “due to concerns of box office income.”³² That decision ultimately led to the renunciation of the concession system altogether. Hülsen began by producing popular comedies by Roderich Benedix, Paul Lindau, and Emil Pohl; by 1865 he was even presenting French *Sittenstücke* (a term German critics dismissively used to describe plays like Dumas fils’ *Camille* and Augier’s *M. Poirier’s Son-in-Law*), while maintaining the traditional practice of doing “old dusty productions of classics,”

and “allowing actors to get away with all manner of self-absorbed displays of virtuosity.”³³

It was too late for the Royal Theatre to compete with Wallner anyway. His productions possessed a polish no other manager, concessionaire or royal, could match. The years 1861–65 also witnessed the greatest popularity of Kalisch at the Wallner Theater, often because the actors Wallner had hired had become capable of capturing perfectly the “Berlin types” Kalisch was creating on paper. These actors included Karl Helmerding, who was usually cast as the perplexed little Berliner at odds with the big city; August Neumann, the representative of petit-bourgeois preoccupations such as sooty doorsteps and the price of cabbage; Susanna Göthe and Amalia Wollrabe, who played soubrette roles like the daughter of either Helmerding or Neumann. Göthe and Wollrabe often played girls in love with a rather unpromising journeyman or perhaps wooed by a salesman who promised to take her to the exotic climes of Pomerania or even the Rhineland. Anna Schramm specialized in the mature character woman type who was usually married to the Neumann or Helmerding character.

Wallner’s fortunes during the first half of the decade made him prosperous enough to build his own new structure on Räumer Strasse in 1865. It was an elaborate and much too costly building, with an extremely opulent interior. It was indeed too opulent, some newspaper accounts reported, for the kind of clientele Wallner had always accommodated.³⁴ Corinthian columns had no place in a site of popular entertainment, observers complained, and the front façade of the building was altogether too imposing. Statues of vague classical ancestry stood atop the roof points, while inside the theatre pretentious caryatids supported balconies and halls led to elegant arcades surrounding the main floor auditorium. The stage itself featured elaborate technologies, and the building was so impressive that the city decided to name the street outside Wallner-Theater-Strasse. But once production began inside the theatre, Wallner’s successful touch failed him. Neither the actors nor the audiences could get used to the unfamiliar enormity of the place. It seated over 1,300 patrons, nearly twice his former building’s capacity. One by one, members of Wallner’s ensemble began to leave for other theatres, and Wallner was unable to replace them with individuals of comparable talent. In 1866, disaster struck Wallner when Prussia instigated war against his native Austria. Police authorities interrogated Wallner on his political connections in Vienna, and Prussian military authorities detained him for months on suspicion of espionage. No charges were ever officially lodged against Wallner, but by 1867 he decided to forsake his new theatre and lease it to the director Theodor Lebrun, who ran the theatre until 1886 with a success and profit that far exceeded Wallner’s own.

Lebrun conducted his operations as Wallner had until 21 June 1869. On that date, the concession system ended and managers were free to produce any genre they wanted in any location they could find, provided the usual “other conditions” such as police censorship and public safety had been satisfied. Soon after the law went into force there were calls for a

reinstatement of concessions, largely because so many new theatre operators were thought “unqualified” to be in the business. Those calls went unheeded. The Prussian theatre had by 1869 passed the same milestone which in England had taken place in 1843. The obvious impact of the Freedom to Engage in Business Act was economic; but then, the primary rationale behind the act was to admit unlimited free-market competition among theatre managers. As a result, speculative preoccupation quickly took over, just as it had in London, setting off a wave of theatre construction.³⁵ In the first year alone, ninety new theatres were built in Prussia, an indication of substantial pent-up demand. In the following decade, “a growth of new theatres sprang up like mushrooms out of the ground” as 173 new theatres emerged from the profitable theatrical soil cultivated by concessionaires. Of those new theatres, only seventy-eight went to persons of a professional theatre background. The others, in Max Hochdorf’s picturesque phrase, were run by “fishmongers, shoemakers, upholsterers, and locksmiths.”³⁶ Qualified or not, such new managers served new audiences, with the result that “theatre,” as Max Martersteig lamented, “came to mean a whole host of entertainment possibilities, from the opera to the race track to vaudeville to the bordello and everything in between. It was a kind of...emporium, in which you could get almost any kind of diversion if you had money to pay for it.” New audiences included men whose principal motivation for attendance was to find “and keep a ballet or operetta diva as a mistress.” Such men now jostled for tickets alongside university students, families of professors and civil servants, citizens striving after education and artistic edification. “That was formerly the basic audience for theatre [in Berlin]. That audience had been shoved aside.”³⁷

NOTES

1. Friedrich Engels, “Die ‘Krise’ in Preußen,” *Der Volksstaat* (15 Jan. 1873), 290.
2. Mark Bauerlein, *Literary Criticism: An Autopsy* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 69.
3. Gerhard Wahnrau, *Berlin: Stadt der Theater* (Berlin: Henschel, 1957), 450–52.
4. Bauerlein, 27–28.
5. Johann August Ludwig Fürstenthal, *Das Preussische Civil-Recht nach Anleitung und der Titelfolge des Allgemeinen Landrechts*, vol. 1 (Frankfurt: Keip, 1970), 188. My translation. All translations herein are mine, unless otherwise noted.
6. John Osborne, *The Meinungen Court Theatre* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1988), 32.
7. Ekhof founded the first German court theatre, at Gotha, in 1775.
8. Gerhard Ritter, *Staatskunst und Kriegshandwerk* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1959), 266.
9. The deceit inherent in turning over the duties of censorship to a police force was obvious, since censorship perpetuated the fiction of the sovereign as “trustee for his people, assuring them of good taste and appropriateness in theatrical fare.” The Hohenzollern court, like its counterparts elsewhere in Germany and Austria, made frequent pronouncements about guaranteeing the “validity” of theatre by keeping “vulgarity and disrespectful expressions at a genteel remove from the royal stage,” but those pronouncements rang hollow “in light of the sovereign’s disregard of the theatre in every other respect except censorship.” See Hans Knudsen, *Deutsche Theatergeschichte* (Stuttgart: Kröner, 1970), 319.

10. Döbbelin's *Privileg* moved up in status to a "general concession" in 1786 when he was granted sole use of Französisches Komödienhaus, a structure on Gendarmenmarkt that belonged to the Prussian crown. Döbbelin's newly elevated troupe was titled the "Theater der königlichen preussischen allergnädigsten generalpriviligierten National-Schauspieler" ("The Theatre of the Royal Prussian All-gracious Generally Concessioned National Actors") and became the Königliches Nationaltheater (Royal National Theatre) in 1787. The eminent actor and playwright August Wilhelm Iffland took over the company in 1796. This company became so successful, and found such favor at the Prussian court, that it no longer required a *Privileg*, but was absorbed into the court theatre infrastructure itself, playing alongside the opera, and responsible only to the king himself.

11. The Carlsbad Decrees were drafted at a conference of German states in Karlsbad, now in the Czech Republic. The diet, or parliament, of the German Confederation enacted them into law as a means to counteract revolution; among their numerous provisions, the new laws provided for uniform press censorship, police supervision of theatre rehearsals and performances, the abolition of student fraternities, tighter supervision of universities, and a special police commission to investigate suspected subversive activities.

12. Osborne, 34.

13. Cerf was allowed to perform comedies premiered at the Hoftheater one year after that premiere took place. It is not clear what kind of deals Cerf had to make in order to secure this arrangement, for it was unprecedented. Knudsen (328) claims that court officials exploited Cerf and his family by offering him deals of this sort in exchange for other favors.

14. Knudsen, 319.

15. Eugen Schoendienst, *Geschichte des deutschen Bühnenvereins, 1846–1935* (Berlin: Propyläen, 1979), 17.

16. Peter Evan Turnbull, *Austria* (London: Murray, 1840), 263.

17. Hans Axel Tammo Graf von Schwerin, *Aufsätze und Reden* (Berlin: Parey, 1911), 118.

18. The importance of David Kalisch (1820–72) and his impact on pre-Wilhelmine German culture is significant. Best known as the cofounder and editor of the satirical magazine *Kladderadatsch*, Kalisch's career in the theatre paralleled that of his journalistic endeavors. His extraordinarily popular comedies were collected in five volumes (under the title *Lustige Werke*) and published shortly before his death.

19. By 1848, many theatre supporters, managers, and playwrights, some politicians, intellectuals, and even performers claimed that theatre in Prussia had reached a point where it needed "a state guarantee of the theatre's dignity," in the words of Dresden dramaturg Karl Gutzkow. Their appeal for such a guarantee, however, was based not on expanded freedom, but for government subsidy. It was called the Ladenburg-Kugler Plan, set forth in 1848 by an official in the Prussian Culture Ministry named Adalbert von Ladenburg and an art history professor named Franz Kugler. The plan was perfectly amenable to state control of theatre so long as the state subsidized the theatre. There were concomitant provisions in the plan for raising the artistic standards of provincial stages, cultivating participation in those theatres among provincial governments, a rational system of taxation on box-office sales, the implementation of qualifications for managers of theatres, the creation of real training institutes for young theatre artists, the regulation of royalty payments to playwrights and composers, the development of a pension plan for performers, and finally a set of regulations by which all legal questions regarding theatre performance could be settled. There was great hope, in light of democratic efforts to form a German republic in 1848, that such measures might be implemented. According to Eugen Schoendienst in his *Geschichte des deutschen Bühnenvereins*, none of them was. It remained for private organizations such as the Deutsche Bühnenverein, the Genossenschaft deutscher Bühnengehöriger, the Pensionsstalt für Theaterschaffende, and the Vereinigung künstlerischer Bühnenvorstände gradually to realize points of the Ladenburg-Kugler Plan over the next half-century.

20. Michael Balfour, *The Kaiser and His Times* (New York: Norton, 1972), 18–19.
21. Knudsen, 330.
22. Edwin Hermann Zeydel, "The German Theatre in New York City, 1878–1914," *Deutsch-Amerikanische Geschichtsblätter* XVII (1917), 259.
23. Volker Klotz, *Bürgerliches Lachtheater* (Munich: DTV, 1980), 89.
24. Knudsen, 331.
25. Wahnrau, 495.
26. Knudsen, 332.
27. Erika Wischer, "Das Wallner-Theater in Berlin," Diss. Freie Univ. Berlin, 1967, 178.
28. Wischer, 21.
29. Vossische Zeitung, 18 Sept. 1855, 8.
30. Both productions featured Wallner's wife, Agnes (1826–1901), and doubtless contributed mightily to their success. She played the title role in *Camille* and the ruthless bouncer Suzanne in *The Demi-monde*.
31. David Kalisch was the son of a well-off Breslau family of merchants. He gave the magazine its name and printed the first issue of *Kladderadatsch* by himself. His partners were Rudolf Löwenstein and Ernst Dohm; Kalisch became a master of the Berlin dialect, and it showed up in the magazine and in his plays constantly. Dohm was a native Berliner, while Löwenstein was, like Kalisch, a Jew from Breslau. Löwenstein, however, grew up in an orphanage and later became a Christian—or at least was baptized. Also unlike Kalisch and Dohm, Löwenstein had a classical education, receiving numerous scholarships from the offices of the Prussian crown to attend universities in Breslau and Berlin.
32. Wahnrau, 478.
33. Wahnrau, 480.
34. In his *Das deutsche Theater im neunzehnten Jahrhundert* (Leipzig: Breitkopf und Härtel, 1924) 385–86, Max Martersteig claimed that "the expense of constructing theatre buildings was a result of audience presumptions. Many [new theatres] were over-decorated in the style of the aristocratic venues, styles wholly at odds with the kinds of audiences attending them—but that was what they expected."
35. Osborne, 35.
36. Max Hochdorf, *Die deutsche Bühnengenossenschaft* (Potsdam: Kiepenheuer, 1921), 117.
37. Martersteig, 525.