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William Grange Prof. Dr.
University of Nebraska, wgrange@unl.edu

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Oskar Blumenthal and the Lessing Theater in Berlin, 1888-1904

William Grange
University of Nebraska
Lincoln, Nebraska
USA

Abstract

Oskar Blumenthal (1852-1917) was Berlin’s most feared theatre critic in the early years of the new German Reich. He had the audacity of referring to Goethe as “an egghead” who had no understanding of what made plays effective for audiences, and in other critiques he ridiculed Kleist, Hebbel, and other “important” playwrights—prompting an adversary publicly to call him a “one-man lynch mob.” In the 1880s Blumenthal himself began writing plays, and he was so successful that many self-appointed cultural guardians accused him of damaging the German theatre beyond repair. His became the most frequently performed plays on any German stage well into the new twentieth century, and when he built the Lessing Theater in 1888 he became a theatrical entrepreneur whose triumphs were unsurpassed. Then he leased the Lessing to the man who had criticized him most vociferously and general rejoicing followed “Bloody Oscar” into retirement. Extremely few since Oskar Blumenthal have matched his record as influential critic, successful playwright, and prosperous theatrical entrepreneur. Even fewer have any idea who he was, when he lived, or what he accomplished.

Oskar Blumenthal was the most successful, the most frequently performed, the most envied, and probably the most hated theatre man of the Wilhelmine Era. He was born in Berlin on March 13, 1852, and twenty years later he earned a doctorate in German literature at the University of Leipzig. Within two years he became Feuilleton (an “arts and leisure” section) editor of the Berliner Tageblatt. At that newspaper he became the most widely read theatre critic in Berlin, where he presided as the city’s most feared critic, known within many theatre circles as “Bloody Oscar.” A good example of Blumenthal’s merciless appraisals is the night he and a companion attended the premiere of what both men considered a new play. The companion said he was “surprised the audience didn’t hiss the actors off the stage.” “Well,” Blumenthal said, “it’s difficult to yawn and hiss at the same time” (Hoffmeister 28). Blumenthal directed many of his most severe reviews at a Norwegian playwright who by the late 1870s was beginning to develop a reputation in Berlin, namely Henrik Ibsen. Blumenthal dismissed Ibsen’s innovative use of dramatic structure as “ornamental illustrations of the playwright’s perspicacity;” Ibsen’s interest in the inner tensions of character Blumenthal termed “psychological steeple chasing” (Blumenthal 112). Blumenthal liked “accessibility” in plot construction and character development. Anything inchoate or recondite he usually condemned in his reviews.

That opinion placed Blumenthal at the opposite end of a cultural spectrum stretching all the way to a remote space occupied by the newspaper critic Otto Brahm (1856-1912) and his Freie Bühne organization. Brahm and his organization worked to subvert police censorship and present controversial plays that treated social problems. Brahm and his backers objected to Blumenthal’s plays, and most other contemporary German plays like them, because they offered “absolutely no way out of the problems of our contemporary world. The primary concern of the German theatre-goer has been is to amuse himself as much as possible.” Brahm indeed dismissed most popular German plays as “freshly baked goods that go stale almost as soon as they hit the shelves” (Brahm, Theater 257). Blumenthal, in contrast, felt that popular plays were the theatre’s life-blood.
Blumenthal admired playwrights like Adolph L’Arronge, Gustav von Moser, Paul Lindau, or Franz von Schönthan. He likewise esteemed the theatre managers who presented their plays, men like Theodor Lebrun, August Wolff, Adolf Ernst, or Sigmund Lautenburg, who had become highly adept at discovering entertainment based on a “reproduction of success formulae” (Harden vii) that would pack their houses night after night for months. Many Berlin playwrights and managers who used those formulae became extremely wealthy, for the Wilhelmine years were ones in which live theatre performance faced little competition for the disposable income of growing numbers of middle-class audiences.  

Brahm and his sympathizers lamented such developments. “No bourgeois audience,” said Siegfried Jacobsohn, “can have a theatre [of its own] because it is bourgeois first of all and an audience thereafter. Audiences like those in ancient Athens or in Elizabethan London had a different temperament, a different epidermis, different needs and different longings,” he pontificated. “People who have just put in a full workday, or read news reports about brutish events taking place in all the major cities of the western world come to the theatre with an altogether different set of aesthetic principles from those held by the citizens of Athens, the artisans of the Middle Ages, or the cavaliers of Shakespeare’s day.” Berlin’s theatres in the later Wilhelmine era had almost without exception, Jacobsohn concluded, “bowed at the feet of social classes who comprised their clientele, creating theatres which were simply meeting production demands in what had been an intellectual activity. [Such theatres] had now gained a complete foothold” (Jacobsohn 14; Sollmann 145).

Blumenthal began his playwriting career in the early 1880s under the pen name “Otto Guhl,” and by 1883 he enjoyed impressive success with Der Probepfeil (The Trial Balloon), which premiered at L’Arronge’s Deutsches Theater. Blumenthal’s playwriting bespoke the dramatic qualities he had advocated as a critic. The Trial Balloon, however, earned him the enmity of colleagues, and that enmity grew proportionally with his continued achievements. No other playwright in the 1880s and 1890s could match Blumenthal’s total of hit plays. When he became a manager in 1888 by building his own superbly equipped and tastefully appointed theatre near the new Reichstag building in Berlin, he had few peers in the knack of making enormous sums of money from the enterprise of theatre. The Trial Balloon became the second most-frequently performed comedy throughout Germany during the 1883-1884 season. It was a likable satire on decadent aristocrats, brazen coquettes, and society pianists, all of whom were gaining social prominence during the 1880s in the Second Reich. Blumenthal subsequently wrote or co-wrote a dozen hit comedies. Some of them were so successful that they often competed with each other in several theatres in the same German city. His most successful season came in 1897-1898, when three of his plays were among the top five most frequently produced on German stages. One of them, Im weiss’n Rößl (The White Horse Inn) remained one of the most frequently performed comedies for years after it initially premiered. Another of his comedies, adapted by David Belasco in 1900 as Is Marriage a Failure? ran for 366 performances during the 1909-1910 season on Broadway.

What was perhaps most significant in his multifaceted, successful career was his characteristic refusal to voice any regrets or apologies for his success—a tendency that gained him additional hostility in the press. Blumenthal’s playwriting success was based, his critics noted and as he himself admitted, on supremely well-crafted superficiality, consisting of formulaic plots and a whole-hearted embrace of aphorism and badinage. Critic Julius Bab said Blumenthal’s plays were always characterized by “a paucity of any real interest in human motivation” (Bab 62). Another critic said his characters “lacked gravity” and were little more
than “husks full of effective witticisms” (Schaubühne 14). Jokes “came out of the character’s mouth and did not emanate from the character’s inner dramatic being, while the characters themselves had only a loose connection to the plot,” complained Rudolph Lothar (282). One could have anticipated such playwriting, however, by having read Blumenthal’s theatre reviews. As a critic, he had always prized facile exchanges over internal development. He realized that most audience members did not understand internal development in characters, and if they did understand it they did not care about the niceties of a character’s “inner dramatic being,” “human motivation,” or “gravity” in general.

Blumenthal’s success as a playwright enabled him to construct the Lessing Theater, a facility with suitable pretentiousness, observers noted, for the ostentatiousness of the audience Blumenthal wanted to accommodate. Its architects, Hermann von der Hude and Julius Hennicke, had built several hotels in the area and numerous apartment buildings in the fashionable Tiergarten district, using a similar mock Italian Renaissance building style. They provided façades for Blumenthal that were likewise imposing. The auditorium retained box-pit-gallery arrangements to some extent, though there were several doorways into the auditorium—one door for every two rows of seats—of which at the time no other Berlin theatre could boast. The galleries likewise had easily accessible exits, while the lobbies and other gathering places were large enough to allow patrons to show off their finery. Audiences at many of Berlin’s boulevard theatres consisted of “the aristocracy . . . mixing with hustlers, coquettes, sophomoric dandies, middle-aged playboys, and elderly peacocks” (Turszinky 48). At the Lessing, “jobbers, sportsmen, and do-nothings” along with “the banking and stock market speculators found everything to their taste” (Zabel 102). The objections of such viewpoints notwithstanding, such individuals were the financial basis of Oskar Blumenthal’s operation.

Oskar Blumenthal personified what Max Martersteig claimed was a collusion among the Berlin press, its commercial interests, and its middlebrow literary circles. Blumenthal’s beginnings as a newspaper theatre critic led him to write the “new German Gesellschaftsstück,” a middlebrow society play he felt was an antidote to the “social play” of Ibsen. In the process Blumenthal attracted substantial attention from theatre professionals in Berlin, who like most theatre professionals were afraid to confess the fact that literary plays dealing with social problems rarely attract audiences for an entire season. Blumenthal had no such fear, agreeing with fellow critic and successful playwright Paul Lindau that “in modern [theatre] art, reality seems to begin where soap leaves off.” Martersteig esteemed Blumenthal for writing plays that captured the ethical consciousness of his day (Martersteig 641). Blumenthal’s Das zweite Gesicht (Two-Faced) Die grosse Glocke (The Big Bell), Der schwarze Schleier (The Black Veil), and Ein Tropfen Gift (A Drop of Poison) were far more genuine and less affected than the flimsy comedies of his predecessors Hugo Lubliner, Gustav von Moser, or Carl Lauffs. Like them, Blumenthal was convinced that most people went to the theatre “to be entertained, to laugh and not to cry, to avoid thinking about the sad world outside the theatre” (Booth 169). Unlike them, he wanted theatre to provide not just an evening’s entertainment but rather an entire experience based on accessibility and what he later called a “theatre of the living.”

He constructed the Lessing Theater for those purposes. By “living,” he claimed a desire to present contemporary playwrights like Ibsen, Maurice Maeterlinck, and Hermann Sudermann—though in most cases the “living playwright” was Blumenthal himself. He offered his audiences an experience within a splendid building that accommodated them comfortably and afforded them a feeling of improved self-esteem. He wanted his patrons to feel as good about themselves as he did about himself. When construction on his Lessing Theater began in
1887, it marked the first time since Karl Friedrich Schinkel (1781-1841) in the 1820s that architects had been specifically commissioned to design and build a new free-standing theatre structure in Berlin.²

Blumenthal opened his new theatre on September 11, 1888 with Lessing’s *Nathan der Weise* (Nathan the Wise). Few critics were impressed—though Blumenthal surprised everybody on October 10, 1888 by staging the first fully unabridged version of Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*, in which Nora for the first time on a German stage actually deserted her husband and children.³ Blumenthal’s audiences found Ibsen intolerably preachy and morally smug, so *A Doll’s House* ran for only seventeen performances. Yet Blumenthal wanted to show Berlin that he, alone among producers in Berlin, had both the financial fortitude, the attorneys, and the influence with police censors to present Ibsen uncut. Perhaps his secret desire was to demonstrate to everybody that no matter how one presented Ibsen, few audiences were interested. What audiences really wanted was a *Serienerfolg*, a play that could run an entire season in a repertoire of other less popular offerings. Such a play needed to feature comic situations, witty dialogue, and erotic sensationalism. Blumenthal’s audiences also expected showy effects of every kind, especially jewelry, fancy hairdos, and lavish make-up on the female star performers, a combination often referred to in German theatre reviews as *eine blendene Toilette*, or a “blinding toilette.”

On January 5, 1889 Blumenthal opened the kind of play his new theatre needed, namely Sardou’s *Let’s Get a Divorce*—in Blumenthal’s translation as *Cyprienne*. The translation was perhaps the only novelty Blumenthal could offer, as the play had been done several times in Berlin during the 1880s. Blumenthal also presented Dumas fils’ *The Clemenceau Case* that season, and it was the only production of the play anywhere in Germany, since Blumenthal secured exclusive German-language rights to it from Dumas fils himself. *The Clemenceau Case* created a sensation in Berlin by featuring barely concealed nudity at the play’s beginning. Louisa Brion, a beautiful young actress Blumenthal had hired to play the love interest of the sculptor Clemenceau, assumed the pose of a classic Greek goddess covered only by diaphanous material. Otto Brahm cast a fairly predictable skepticism over the success of both the production and on Louisa Brion herself by stating the play “would have a long run on the legs of a gorgeous actress” (Brahm *Freie Bühne* 523). Brahm concluded his review by quoting a popular ditty of the day that approximated Blumenthal’s premiere season:

So sad he had to sit there,
Hoping at last he had a hit there.
There then unfolded quite a story
When lo, a girl appeared in all her glory,
Trading off a tat for tit there (Wilcke 30).

Police censorship of the nudity question never presented a problem in *The Clemenceau Case* because the character Luisa Brion so skillfully portrayed was a woman of dubious repute to begin with. That she appeared to be nude on stage seemed a natural consequence of her actions both as the sculptor’s model and as his mistress. But Blumenthal, along with his attorney Richard Grelling, had developed skillful techniques to deal with the Berlin police by the 1890s, often convincing them that controversy in comedy was not nearly so dangerous as controversy in straight drama.

Hermann Sudermann’s first play *Ehre* (Honor) followed *The Clemenceau Case*, and its unanticipated success surprised just about everybody—including critic Albert Soergel, who
claimed the play bespoke a “modernist façade, allowing audiences to ‘feel’ modern but providing them an exit before any genuine socio-critical moments were allowed to disturb anyone’s consciousness” (Soergel 86). Blumenthal staged Honor for the very reasons Soergel described: it was make-believe modernism, something his audiences would actually come to see and afterwards feel good about actually liking something that seemed up-to-date. He then presented the German-language premiere of Ibsen’s Hedda Gabler, but like A Doll’s House, it failed to attract attention. In the spring of 1891 Blumenthal premiered a play he and actor Gustav Kadelburg had written, titled Die Grossstadtluft (Big City Airs). It became the colossal success that solved all of Blumenthal’s financial concerns as a producer. “A wind that sits in the sails of the good ship Blumenthal-Kadelburg and Co.,” wrote Maximilian Harden, “allows it to sail wide of the shoals besetting many a premiere. The authors have cleverly created a play that meets all their audience’s expectations. Blumenthal for his part has forsaken any literary ambitions dogging his heels, while Kadelburg brings an unusual freshness to the work, borne of his wide experience as an actor. Kadelburg knows how gladly old acquaintances greet each other in the theatre, and that applies to audiences who are delighted to see time-honored gimmicks on full display” (Harden Köpfe 80). Blumenthal wrote the badinage, word plays, bon mots, and jokes, while Kadelburg developed the situations, though they were distinctly secondary in importance for the comedy’s success. Actors played their roles “well below the demands of their talents” (Vossische Zeitung, 24 October 1891). Blumenthal’s next effort with Kadelburg, Gräfin Fritzi (Countess Fritzi) was even more popular, though in it Blumenthal tried to restrain Kadelburg’s enthusiasm for creating chance meetings, convenient happenstance, withheld information, and startling reversals. That was a shame, said Paul Lindau, because “There isn’t a joke too old or too often heard before in Countess Fritzi. They’re all there” (Lindau, Berliner Börsen Courier). The success of Big City Airs and Countess Fritzi set the stage for more plays like it at the Lessing, such as the Milland and Najac variation on the Cyprienne divorce-theme titled Paragraph 330. In this play a divorcing couple find themselves falling in love with each other during the trial hearings. Ludwig Fulda’s Das Recht der Frau (A Woman’s Rights) parodied feminist aspirations, Paul Heyse’s Wahrheit? (Reality?) lampooned Naturalism by making fun of Zola, Hauptmann, and other proponents of the so-called “new” theatre. The most curious success of 1893 was the world premiere of Hermann Sudermann’s straight play Heimat. This play, in its English version titled Magda, was one of the few originally in German to attract an English-language audience in the 1890s. It featured a preternatural conflict between Magda and her father and evinced Sudermann’s aptitude for coupling a fashionable dilemma (female emancipation vs. patriarchal control) with effective stage performance. The play did not, of course, disclose much in the way of intellectual content; Magda and her father remained two-dimensional, and Maximilian Harden condemned Heimat as “a masterpiece of theatrical falsehood. Every tone is screamingly spurious, and the tricks [Sudermann] uses to prolong the play’s tension in the final act have absolutely nothing to do with anything remotely artistic” (Wilcke 39). Harden was referring to the father’s convenient collapse from a cerebral hemorrhage just as the play’s climax was reaching its conclusion. It was an ideal play for the Lessing Theater.

The Lessing was a bastion of anti-modernist theatrical taste, and Oskar Blumenthal’s exertions there formed a bulwark against encroaching modernist sentiments, many of them emanating from the aforementioned Otto Brahm. Brahm had been Blumenthal’s most articulate competitor when both men were newspaper critics. When Brahm likewise became a theatre manager and director, their competition intensified. Indeed the Oskar Blumenthal-Otto Brahm
relationship reveals a great deal about the dynamics of the Wilhelmine theatre as a whole. Blumenthal and Brahm were approximately the same age, both extremely well educated, both from bourgeois Jewish families, both had begun their careers in journalism, and both became extraordinarily successful in subsequent theatrical pursuits. Yet an enormous gulf in aesthetic taste and political conviction separated them. Brahm as the director of the Freie Bühne organization had advocated the cause of Naturalism and a wholesale reform of the German theatre for the sake of what he termed “modern life.” When in 1894 he took over the reins of the Deutsches Theater in Berlin, he turned the Deutsches into a literary showplace, presenting one Gerhart Hauptmann premiere after another and continuing the Freie Bühne tradition of “theatre for modern life.” He maintained the position that a stage director’s two most important abilities as “the art of staging and the art of literary discovery” (Vossische Zeitung 29 September 1883). Brahm’s vision ultimately conquered Blumenthal’s, and the conquest ironically took place in the very building Blumenthal had constructed as a monument to his own vision of what the German theatre should accomplish.

How could that happen? How could Oskar Blumenthal, one of the most successful personalities the Berlin theatre had ever known, simply disappear into the mists and allow modernism to reign triumphant in his theatre? Throughout the 1890s and well into the new century, the Lessing had continued to provide Berlin audiences with popular, middle-brow theatrical entertainment, for which Blumenthal had been such a staunch advocate and of which he became a most prolific and successful creator. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, Blumenthal had become restless. “They say a year in war is two years in peacetime, and a year in the theatre is like two years of war,” Blumenthal said. “So in effect, I’m leaving after a thirty-year career” (Neuer Theater-Almanac X 1899, 151). The ironic conclusion to Blumenthal’s career in Berlin was his unadmitted defeat at the hands of modernism, for the man to whom Blumenthal leased his theatre in 1904 was none other than Otto Brahm.

Brahm proceeded to do not just Ibsen’s plays, but cycles of Ibsen’s plays. By the time of his death in 1912, Brahm had produced and staged at the Lessing nearly every play Ibsen ever wrote, along with more Hauptmann premieres, and even premieres of Arthur Schnitzler’s gloomy depictions of melancholy in turn-of-the-century Vienna. The Lessing Theater in Berlin thus became a kind of microcosm of the way Berlin’s theatre began to change during the later Wilhelmine years. What had begun as the center of a thriving “boulevard culture” ultimately died an unmourned death and was buried in an unmarked grave. Who, for example, in the dawning years of the twenty-first century has even heard of Oskar Blumenthal? Who remembers the titles of his stupendously popular plays? Is it rhetorical to ask further, who would dare nowadays to produce one of them? Some students of the German theatre, admittedly very few of them, have speculated on those questions, along with the question of why Blumenthal turned the Lessing over to Brahm. One answer may be that Blumenthal wanted to give Otto Brahm enough rope to hang himself with, knowing that Brahm would serve up as much Ibsen, Hauptmann, and Schnitzler as possible and thereby give final proof that most audiences simply rejected the modern “social problem play.” Another reason may have been financial, since the lease on the Lessing was extremely expensive. Perhaps Blumenthal hoped Brahm would have to break the lease and finally convince everybody that Ibsen and the others were essentially box office poison.

As it turned out, Brahm did not break the lease, but Ibsen did in most instances prove to be a box-office failure. Of all the plays Brahm staged in Blumenthal’s theatre, the sentimental nationalistic melodrama Glaube und Heimat (Faith and Homeland) by Karl Schönherr was the
most popular, followed by Hermann Bahr’s domestic comedy Das Konzert (The Concert). Along with Bahr’s comedy and Schönerr’s melodrama, Brahm featured the preposterous farce Der Raub der Sabinerinnen (The Rape of the Sabine Women), the very same farce that Blumenthal had run since 1888. Thus both Blumenthal and Brahm could claim a victory of sorts: Blumenthal proved, through Brahm, that a producer could not concentrate solely on literary plays. He had to combine them with popular fare like The Concert, Faith and Homeland, and The Rape of the Sabine Women if his theatre were to survive. Yet Brahm proved that Ibsen could indeed attract audiences, if those audiences had been sufficiently exposed to the “socially conscious” play to develop a taste for it. Both men were losers to economic forces beyond their control, of course: the motion picture had by 1905 established a foothold in Berlin, and the result was a rapid loss of theatre’s near-monopoly on the mass audience. It is altogether likely that both men could see that kind of handwriting on the walls of the Lessing Theatre; fortunately neither of them lived long enough to witness the German theatre’s wholesale collapse as an entertainment medium and its ultimate capitulation to modernism, with its attendant insistence upon and its embrace of an elitism that drove away what was left of the middlebrow audience.

NOTES

1 In a survey of the German theatre’s “social economics,” Gustav Rickelt listed Blumenthal, August Wolff of the Belle-Alliance Theatre, Adolf L’Arronge at the Deutsches Theater, Ludwig Barnay of the Berliner Theater, Sigmund Lautenburg of the Residenz Theater, and Adolf Ernst of the Adolf-Ernst Theater as men who had become millionaires as theatre managers in Berlin (91).

2 The Lessing Theater was destroyed in a 1943 Allied bombing raid over Berlin.

3 The first Berlin production of A Doll’s House opened in October of 1880 at the Residenz Theater in the “reconciliation” version in which Nora looks in on her sleeping children and remains with her husband. It was based on the first German production staged Munich of March 1880 (Frenzel 23).

4 Brahm presented Hauptmann performances a total of 1169 times between 1894 and 1904, or one third of his total of 3,000 performances (Goldmann 13). One reason he did so was Hauptmann’s grant to Brahm of exclusive performance rights to his plays in Berlin.

5 All of these questions are doubtlessly rhetorical, although a Berlin production of Im weiss’n Rössl (The White Horse Inn) took place in 1997. It was not the Blumenthal original, however. It was the Ralph Benatsky musical based on the play, starring Max Raabe and Otto Sander.

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