1995

"The Blondest of the Blondes"

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

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/theatrefacpub

Part of the Theatre and Performance Studies Commons

Grange, William Prof. Dr., ""The Blondest of the Blondes"" (1995). Faculty Publications and Creative Activity, School of Theatre and Film. 15.
http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/theatrefacpub/15
The revolution in German theatre performance which had taken place in the aftermath of the Kaiser’s abdication, military defeat, and social collapse had been unintentional. Social Democrats like Friedrich Ebert, Philip Scheidemann, Gustav Noske and other SPD leaders had few plans for the theatre in a new, republican Germany, despite the fact that they had founded the republic in a theatre. They were concerned with freedom of speech, but the article outlawing censorship in the Weimar constitution was a reaction to the philistinism and prudery of the Wilhelmine years more than an attempt to encourage new playwrights, designers, directors, and actors. The Weimar Republic witnessed a theatrical revolution all the same, as if “a valve had been opened, then new plays and productions came sizzling out like a cloud of steam” (Ihering 60). The German theatre underwent a revolution of comparable magnitude in 1933 when the National Socialists took power. It, however, was carefully devised and pre-arranged. The Nazis had an avid interest in theatre as an expression of “the peoples’ will,” even though they viewed the theatre of the Weimar Republic as a Babylon of “hyper-modern, bolshevistic, mollusk-like, and neurasthenic aesthetics” (Brenner 16). The Nazis saw themselves as guarantors of what Meinecke had called “the deep yearning for the inner unity and harmony of all laws of life which remains a powerful force in the German spirit” (48). Thus any manifestation of modernism they condemned, attacked, and finally extirpated. They associated Expressionist performance styles generally, and of individuals like actor Fritz Kortner or dancer Mary Wigman in particular, with “communism, avant-garde art, moral decadence, Jewishness, and revolution” (de Jonge 172). They believed that the world, especially the German-speaking part of it, had once been a better place. Medieval society with its sense of community (depicted most faithfully in Wagner’s Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg) was in
their minds an ideal realm. Somebody had stolen that realm from them, because they “firmly believed in a conspiratorial view of history and of society,” as Fritz Stern noted. Their world “had been destroyed by evil hands,” and those hands belonged to the forces of modernism (xix). The Nazis promoted a culture and conception of performance which reflected the taste of the would-be painter Hitler and the would-be writer Goebbels; it was a grandiose vision, like Wagner’s; it was static, like the declamatory passages of Goethe’s Faust or Schiller’s Wilhelm Tell; and above all it was “Nordic” (i.e., white, non-Latin, non-Slavic, and especially non-Jewish). “The radical culture of the Weimar Republic was to be stamped out as negroid, semitic, and decadent; it had been hopelessly tarnished with the great national shame of the Versailles Treaty and the ‘stab in the back’ of November, 1918” (Willett Neher 22).

The revolution of November, 1918 had failed, however, to revolutionize Germany. The Social Democrats succeeded in defibrillating a number of revolutionary movements throughout the country, but they proved impotent against traditional bases of Wilhelmine power, namely the army, the bureaucracy, the estate owners in Junker fiefdoms, and the big industrialists. These bases of power remained strong throughout the Republic, and with their support conservative forces were able to gather strength, especially after the economic collapse of 1929. Yet there was a real sense, albeit brief, of revolution in the performing arts; the intellectual excitement was most obvious in theatres during the 1920s. The innovations of Brecht, the political theatre of Piscator, the scenic and directorial departures of Jessner, and the startling arrival on the scene of many new actors all documented what Siegfried Kracauer called “a departure from the shattered world of
yesterday towards a tomorrow built on the grounds of revolutionary conceptions. . . .” It was as if audiences suddenly began to understand the meaning of the avant-garde, and they saw themselves “mirrored in visionary dramas announcing to a suicidal mankind the gospel of a new age of brotherhood,” as performers approached their art with “the desire to commune with the people” (Kracauer 38).

Since the revolution in theatre performance did nothing to change the basic power structure left over from the Wilhelmine days, the Nazis faced little resistance in their campaign to destroy the Weimar theatre and to establish new standards of performance when they took over the reigns of political control. As early as 1925 they promised a complete overhaul of German theatre upon assuming power, and high among their cultural priorities was a campaign against “bastardized mestizoism” in theatre art with the aid of a state bureaucracy. National Socialist cultural theory was, however, similar to many of its supposed “doctrines:” it was formulated to give them a patina of intellectual legitimacy; their ideas of cultural reform were merely an amalgamation of anti-liberal and anti-modernist trends which had been in the wind since the mid-19th century. As Hitler defined it, the Nazi “aesthetic program” was based on the notion that Europe was in decline; the whole of European culture was at risk due to a lost idealism and an embrace of cosmopolitanism; Germans were in particular danger, for they were caught in a cultural crossfire between Jewish-led capitalism from the west and Jewish-inspired Marxism from the east. “During the long years in which I planned the formation of the new Reich,” Hitler stated, “I gave much thought to the tasks awaiting us in the cultural cleansing of peoples’ lives” (Baynes 588).
Hitler, according to Günther Rühle, viewed the theatre of the Weimar Republic as “a contamination of culture” which needed treatment as if it were “an outbreak of venereal disease” (10). The infection itself, however, had invaded the body politic in the later 19th century. Nazi ideologue Alfred Rosenberg claimed that Gerhart Hauptmann, for example, had not really written plays but had “merely gnawed at the rotten roots of the 19th-century middle classes and constructed theatrical pieces from newspaper reports” (272).

Hauptmann was by no means the worst of the “pseudo-playwrights” Rosenberg had in mind; he included Frank Wedekind, Hermann Sudermann, and “the later swarm” of Georg Kaiser, Franz Werfel, Walter Hasenclever, and Carl Sternheim in a group he termed “inwardly worthless, unfruitful disintegrators” who praised everything “insolent, corrupt, artificial, impotent, and crippled” (272). “The creation of the prostitute Lulu is the highest to which these ‘poets’ could attain,” he said. “That is the essence of... modern drama and... theatre today:... a stink of corpses emanating from Paris, Vienna, Moscow, and New York. ... Bastards are the ‘heroes’ of the times. Whores and naked dance revues under black management are the art form of the November democracy. The end, the total plague of the soul seems imminent” (274). The Nazi preoccupation with cultural decline made them diametrically opposed to modernism, with its emphasis upon the “isolated, even alienated individual, its abandonment of objectivity, its restlessness, and its distorted narrative” (Grosshans 10). The Nazis were certainly not the first ones in Germany opposing modernist theatre and drama; the forces of philistinism had made the production of Wedekind’s plays extremely difficult throughout the playwright’s lifetime, and only when the anti-censorship clause in the Weimar constitution went into effect were his plays, Sternheim’s, and those of
other modernists allowed complete freedom of public performance. Reactionary moralists had begun to use the term “cultural bolshevism” to describe modernist theatre works as early as 1918; the Nazis, however, were able to capitalize politically on the term and to incorporate the remediation of cultural decline into their campaign platforms during the later 1920s and early 1930s.

They were also able to advocate alternatives for the widespread corruption of the cultural scene as they perceived it in the Weimar Republic. If the depraved modern playwright preoccupied himself with putrefaction, decay, and disintegration, the “true” German artist of the theatre concerned himself with the projection of truth, which was “the basic heroic trait of the German people and the most forceful influence in German history.” True German art, according to Henry Grosshans in his study of Hitler’s attitudes towards artists, provided direction “for the driving German will, ending modern loneliness, chaos, and confusion, and protecting the threatened racial insights of heroism and courage” (66-67). The German theatre artist became much more than merely an entertainer in the Nazi lexicon; he was a seer, a kind of priest who tended the sacred flame of national integrity. Hitler recognized such an artist, for example, in the person of Hanns Johst. Soon after his release from Landsberg prison, Hitler contacted Johst about writing a play with a Nazi heroic prototype as protagonist. *Schlageter* was the result, although it did not premiere until Hitler’s birthday in 1933, by which time the Nazi government was beginning to implement its cultural policies throughout the country. The play, which focused on the real-life episode of war veteran Leo Schlageter taking on almost singlehandedly the French occupation troops in the Ruhr region in 1923, premiered in the Staatliches Schauspielhaus,
where Leopold Jessner had throughout the Republic created productions the Nazis abhorred; Jessner personified the kind of theatre artist they despised: he was Jewish, and his modernist productions of Schiller and Shakespeare had marked him as one of the leading “wretched comedians” infecting German culture—especially since he had been, as head of the prestigious and state-subsidized Schauspielhaus, an influential member of the Weimar theatrical elite. But Jessner had long since lost his position by the time Hitler became Chancellor and Johst’s play premiered; so had many other German theatre artists who were not “the real artists and portrayers of the heart of the German people,” according to Nazi theatre historian Wilhelm von Schramm. Actors like Elisabeth Bergner and Fritz Kortner, directors like Erwin Piscator and Berthold Viertel, playwrights Bertolt Brecht and Carl Zuckmayer, along with many other outstanding Weimar theatre artists, were now “empty, typical lurid creatures of the night” (Wardetsky 19). What and whom would the Nazi regime employ as their replacements?

The Nazis began to implement measures to solidify the regime’s totalitarian control over theatre in Germany hard on the heels of their measures to implement political control. In February of 1933 the new government gave quasi-military organizations like the SA and SS police jurisdiction and authority; after the Reichstag fire on 27 February it outlawed the German Communist Party (KPD) and began to suppress the Social Democrats. In March elections the Nazi party won 288 Reichstag seats, enabling it to expand its control over the cabinet, which at that time had only three Nazi ministers. Now the government began its active pursuit of complete control over cultural affairs. That month saw the creation of the “Reich Ministry for Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda,” the first such ministry in
German history, with Joseph Goebbels at its head. The Propaganda Ministry (or “ProMi,” as it was called) became the cornerstone around which the regime constructed its massive structure of cultural control. In September of that year the government promulgated the Reich Cultural Chamber Law, naming the ProMi as the agency empowered to administer it. The new law created the Reich Cultural Chamber, which had administrative divisions for painting, music, architecture, sculpture, literature, and theatre. Within the Reich Theatre Chamber were various organizations of actors, playwrights, dancers, stage managers, directors, and choreographers. The first president of the Reich Theatre Chamber was Otto Laubinger, and his representative to the profession was the popular star Werner Krauß. Producers were not represented; the state was to take their place. “The German theatre has come to grips with its existence and its character,” stated Eduard Frauenfeld, first business director of the Reich Theatre Chamber. “The German actor has left vagabondage behind and has gained official recognition. All German theatres have finally become state theatres” (Wulf 35). He was describing the process known as Gleichschaltung, or bringing all aspects of theatre activity into line with party dogma, aims, and priorities. The process of Gleichschaltung made rapid strides after passage of the Reich Theatre Law in May of 1934. Its ostensible purpose was the enhancement of theatre’s image among citizens so that it need no longer “to be looked upon as a business . . . but be conscious of its cultural-political mission.” Theatre was to become “a public matter . . . independent of commercial questions and take a central place in the life of the people” (Haider-Pregler 207). A principal goal of the law, however, was to exclude all Jewish artists from the theatre. Jews were forbidden to hold membership in any Reich Theatre Chamber organization and thus could not receive a contract to work.
Theatre artists remaining loyal, or at least dependable, to the regime prospered greatly during the Third Reich due to a quirk in the Nazi leadership. While Goebbels had carefully structured theatre organizations in his Propaganda Ministry, he had not reckoned with a competing governmental theatre agency, at least in Berlin: that was the Prussian Cultural Ministry, which had charge of the Staatliches Schauspielhaus and the Schiller Theater. Hermann Goering had become Minister President of Prussia and was not to be outdone by Goebbels in control of or support for theatres in his domain. Goebbels and Goering’s ministries vied with each other during the 1930s and 1940s while competing with still a third organization, the “Surveillance Office” of the Nazi Party. This office had neither a state nor national governmental responsibility but was instead charged with the “intellectual and perceptual education of party members.” Since all three contended with each other for influence over theatre, the result was an enormous increase in funding.

During the Third Reich, theatres experienced a cash inflow unprecedented in their history. In all, forty nine theatre buildings were completely refurbished. Work began first in 1933 on the Staatliches Schauspielhaus, whose Intendant became Gustaf Gründgens. Gründgens was a close personal friend of Emmy Sonnemann, the actress who was Goering’s lover. Sonnemann had also played the female lead in Schlageter. Gründgens received enormous sums of money from Goering to contract the biggest names in the industry. Theatres under ProMi jurisdiction also received large amounts, much of it from an organization called “Strength Through Joy,” a fund-raising arm of the party. Theatres also earned substantial sums on their own at the box office. Attendance tripled between 1932
and 1936, when the Nazi Party began to tout theatre attendance as “a national duty” (Drewniak 44). Official largesse did not mean that new theatres were constructed or that new companies were formed. Money went mostly to personnel and refurbishment costs. The number of actors, for example, saw a marked increase. During the 1932-33 season, for example, there were a total of 2,999 actors under contract in Germany. By the 1938-39 season, that figure had risen to 4,086, and the average salaries performers earned were far in excess of what professionals in other fields could expect (Drewniak 42). Popular stars like Hans Albers or Käthe Dorsch were in fact among the highest paid individuals in the whole country; Albers earned 562,000 Marks in 1937; Dorsch made substantially less–152,700 Marks–but compared to the average worker’s wages of 2500 Marks per year, Albers and Dorsch earned princely sums.

Albers was “blondest of the blondes,” according to Fritz Kortner (Aller Tage Abend 257), who had worked with him in What Price Glory? during the Weimar Republic. Kortner was one of those artists whom the Nazis accused of “Jewifying” the German theatre, so he was naturally excluded from the new constellations of stars the Nazis exalted. Yet Albers was not only the highest paid star in the Third Reich, he was something of an anomaly among German actors generally. Originally a musical performer from Bavaria, Albers brought to the Berlin stage a smoothness, polish, and elegance long prized in English actors like Rex Harrison or John Gielgud. Such performers were adept in witty repartee and in comedies of manners. But the comedy of manners is virtually non-existent in German drama; many French, English, and American boulevard farces had been successfully imported during the 1920s (Kaufman and Ferber’s The Royal Family, for example, enjoyed a
long Berlin run), but most German audiences regarded the “smooth conversation piece” as both “boring and unserious” (Willett *Weimar* 162). Among the Nazis, however, Albers’ style was considered “Germanically sophisticated,” with an appeal to their petit-bourgeois constituency with its anti-modernist need for comprehensible entertainment, remaining titillating enough to convey a sense of sexual daring. Albers’ masculinity translated during performance as an enormously appealing ladies’ man. His longtime companion was Hansi Burg, daughter of Jewish actor Eugen Burg, whom the Nazis murdered in a concentration camp. Nazi authorities permitted Albers to remain with Hansi until 1939, when he arranged for her to emigrate to Switzerland. Permissiveness towards Albers and his choice of companions was a reflection of Goering’s policy towards Gründgens, the most well-known homosexual in the theatre of the Third Reich. Gründgens’ acting was in a way similar to that of Albers, although the former was far more accomplished in the classics; indeed his signature role was Mephisto in *Faust*, and to it he brought an unaccustomed mobility, vocal range, and musical delivery. He was also remarkably successful in defending himself and many of his colleagues at the Staatliches Schauspielhaus against Nazi persecution, due to the close relationship he enjoyed with his patron. And while Goering and the Nazis prized the skills and polish of performers like Gründgens or Albers, they did not reject the traditional esteem in which German audiences held character types. Such types were physically large, robust, ugly, and capable of extreme emotions in performance. This was the *urwüchsige Kraftkerl*, whose earthy primitiveness evoked instant sympathy and compassion. Heinrich George personified this type; he weighed about 275 pounds, and among his successes during the Third Reich was Falstaff. But he also played a leading role in the blood-and-soil epic *Mensch aus Erde gemacht*, or “the man made of earth.” He was so
successful as the Nazi incarnation of the *Kraftkerl* that he was named head of Goering’s “other” Prussian state theatre, the Schiller on Bismarck Strasse in Berlin. The female manifestation of the type was in favor, too: Lucie Höflich, for example, weighed about 165 pounds, and stood taller than most other female performers. She was wide-hipped, flat-chested, and had thick, blonde hair. As such she represented the ideal “Gretchen” type, a role she played frequently during the later 1930s and early 1940s, although she was much too old for the part.

The fact that Höflich was able to continue playing the virginal Gretchen while the actress was approaching age sixty is simply another manifestation of how the Nazis imposed their cultural vision upon the German theatre. The stars they supported were more than just types corresponding to Nazi ideology; they were, it is more important to note, “dependable” in the party’s view, and there were many others eager to join the new constellations. They included Emil Jannings, the aforementioned Krauß, Paul Wegener, and Hermine Körner, all of whom joined Gründgens at Goering’s Schauspielhaus. Goering regarded this group as his personal company, as if he were an Elizabethan nobleman with a troupe in livery. Goebbels meanwhile began to grow jealous of Goering’s troupe and decided to form a company of his own. The theatre building he chose to house the company was Max Reinhardt’s Deutsches Theater, where the most important events in recent German theatre history had taken place; it had been home to Otto Brahm’s Freie Bühne and later to Reinhardt’s masterful productions of Strindberg, Shakespeare, and Wedekind. Goebbels expropriated the property from Reinhardt and reopened it as a Propaganda Ministry showpiece, with Heinz Hilpert as its Intendant.
Hilpert was, like Gründgens, a strong-willed, authoritarian director. That kind of personality accorded with Nazi tastes; at least it was in keeping with what they termed the “Führer-Prinzip,” or leadership principle. It was a reflection of their “anthropomorphic” view of history, in which great men were the “determining forces of change” in the world (Hanson 263). Nazi ideology held the West’s decline attributable to a lack of community which only a strong leader could ameliorate. Directors like Hilpert and Gründgens exercised complete control over all aspects of production; that did not make them Nazis, but their way of working the Nazis could understand. Accordance with Nazi taste was less responsible for Nazi support of theatre than was the banal fact of Nazi enthusiasm for the superficial glamour attached to theatre and to theatre personalities. Hitler and the others were in many cases simply star-struck. Hitler enjoyed sending his favorites telegrams of good wishes, notes of congratulations, flowers, chocolates, and other small gifts. When he received their letters of gratitude, he exulted over them like a small American boy might with his collection of baseball cards. Not only were they generous in the salaries paid to stars, but Nazis also bestowed on their favorites honors which before the Third Reich would have been unthinkable. Werner Krauß received the Goethe Medal in 1938, for example, and Emil Jannings the same award in 1939. Other actors received the title “Honorary Professor” for “special excellence in their fields.” In 1937, a totally new honor was created, that of Staatsschauspieler, or State Actor. Heinrich George and Lucie Höflich were among the first so honored, with Albers, Käthe Haack, and Paula Wessely joining their ranks in later years. Such honors and prizes not only evinced Nazi enthusiasm for theatre
performance, they were also an indication of how successful the Nazis were in their appeal to the performers’ vanity.

The regime lavished riches and privilege not only upon performers, for it fostered the creation of more than 2,000 new plays between 1933 and 1944. The playwright most obviously in favor during the Third Reich was the aforementioned Johst. He had written a play titled *Thomas Paine* in 1927 but amidst the supposed corruption and degradation that was the theatre scene during the Weimar Republic, only the Nazis recognized in it something they could call “true” German dramatic art. The general public had reacted with indifference to it when it premiered; when it “re-premiered” in 1936 under the direction of Jürgen Fehling, the character of Paine was “rediscovered” as a Nazi hero, and one critic later described Paine as “the American Horst Wessel” (Drewniak 184). Despite his success and his high status within the Nazi cultural pantheon, Hanns Johst stopped writing plays after *Schlageter*, which he had dedicated to Hitler “in loving veneration and unshakable faithfulness.” He spent the remainder of the Third Reich as head of the Reich Authors’ Union and lived handsomely on the royalties earned from the numerous yearly productions of his plays. There was also generous support for new productions of already well-known German playwrights. Chief among them was Schiller, and on the 175th anniversary of his birth in November of 1934, Goebbels declared a “German Schiller Year.” More than 2100 performances of Schiller’s plays took place during the following months—although even Schiller could not escape bureaucratic censure: Hitler had claimed that *Wilhelm Tell* was his favorite Schiller piece, and the play appeared frequently on German stages until 1941. In that year a directive issued from the ProMi forbidding future productions and removing
the play from school libraries. The play deals with struggle against tyranny, and one can assume that the Nazis discovered that fact as late as 1941. They also discovered that Shakespeare had Jewish connections, at least in German theatre history: in 1842 Ludwig Tieck had commissioned Felix Mendelssohn to compose music for the Berlin production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*; the music proved to be so popular that for the next ninety years most German productions of the play employed it. Since Mendelssohn was of Jewish extraction, Goebbels ordered the music removed from all *Dream* productions and commissioned Carl Orff to compose new, more “Aryan” sounding music for the play.

Thus Felix Mendelssohn, who had been dead for eighty-six years when the Nazis took power, joined the ranks of “non-Aryans,” Marxists, homosexuals, and thousands of other theatre artists deemed officially objectionable. Ultimately more than 4,000 persons formerly employed in the German theatre left the country (Drewniak 145). For them, the revolution in the theatre which the Nazis had fostered and had so generously underwritten resembled a cruel hoax. They watched in exile, many of them poverty-stricken and homeless, as money and privileges rained down upon their former colleagues. Many exiles at first hovered near their homeland, hoping somehow to create theatre again on a German-language stage. Brecht went to Switzerland, then to Denmark, then to Finland; Jessner fled to France; Kortner and Bergner to England, Reinhardt and Zuckmayer finally settled in the United States. As German armed forces swept through Europe after 1939, the theatrical diaspora extended into forty countries, with the United States sheltering a majority of expatriates. Brecht came to the U.S. via the Soviet Union, as did Piscator; Jessner via Palestine, Kortner via France. Some returned to Germany after the war to take up their
careers again. Others, like Reinhardt, Jessner, Ernst Toller, Alexander Granach and hundreds of others died before the war’s end; they had, as Hamlet said, suffered “the insolence of office,” and remained in an “undiscovered country, from whose bourn no traveler returns.”
WORKS CITED


