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## Review of "Glaube Liebe Hoffnung" by Ödön von Horváth at Staatsschaupiel Dresden.

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Review of  
*Glaube Liebe Hoffnung*  
“A Little Dance of Death in Five Scenes”  
by Ödön von Horváth

Staatsschaupiel Dresden  
Intendant Dr. Dieter Görne  
October 12, 1994  
directed by Irmgard Lange  
dramaturg: Beate Seidel  
costume and set design by Volker Walther  
lighting design by Ulrich Motz

While the venerable Dresden Schauspielhaus, built in 1910, is undergoing renovation (the process was begun in August of 1993 and is scheduled for completion next summer), the Staatsschaupiel Dresden is located in numerous venues throughout the city. They include the Kleines Haus in der Neustadt, a former recital hall on the north bank of the Elbe; a small space in a former automotive factory; a small chapel in the restored Dresden Castle; and a tent near the present Schauspielhaus. The tent is called the “Kuppeltheater” (Cupola Theatre), and it has a vague, if weirdly abstract resemblance to the cupolas sitting atop the baroque palaces, churches, and museums for which this city is well known. Any resemblance between the Kuppel Theater and the renowned architecture of the “German Florence,” as Dresden has traditionally been called is purely coincidental; the tent has been rented from a West German entrepreneur and its interior has facilitated Irmgard Lange’s innovative production of Ödön von Horváth’s *Glaube Liebe Hoffnung*, the shorter version he subtitled “a little dance of death.” Lange has also interlarded the working script with snippets of the playwright’s work related to the play, and the result is a dark, disturbed vision of a world in complete collapse.

Anyone who has seen Horváth in performance will recognize that world; he did not present a particularly happy outlook, even though he titled his plays *Volkstücke*, a genre historically

associated with young love, musical backgrounds, and robust humor. This play briefly portrays a loving couple, but the music Horváth recommends is Chopin's Funeral March and its humor is cadaverous rather than robust. It begins in front of a mortuary, after all, and its central conflict arises between its heroine Elisabeth and her one-time benefactor, the Mortician. Is there any faith, hope or charity to be found here? Irmgard Lange and her ensemble make an extensive search for them, but they turn up fleetingly in the brave attempts of the doomed Elisabeth. She has a tiny hope for a little love in her life; what she gets instead is a prison term, rejection from the only decent man she ever met, and finally death.

The production features startling scenic effects, reminiscent of Ariane Mnouchkine's *Mephisto* in Paris nearly fifteen years ago. There is no stage floor in the Kuppel Theater, for instance; it has been replaced by water, over which twelve inch-wide boards have been placed to create walkways for the actors. A pigeon coop is situated up the side of the tent, running across its roof to the tent's center; inside it, live pigeons bill and coo throughout the performance. A character falls into the water and sinks in up to his neck; a cow's skull sits rotting in the water and garbage is piling up in one place, while the process of putrefaction is taking place in others. A character deposits dry ice into the water from his briefcase, creating a bubbling fog effect that lasts for several minutes. A fire display occurs in the upper reaches of the tent, alternating with rain that falls intermittently throughout the performance. A wind machine drives a tempest of rain and fog across the stage area. "My future has fallen into the water" is a common German aphorism (whose analogy in English might be Amanda Wingfield's "All my hopes and dreams--up the spout!"); as Elisabeth repeats it, she evokes much of what this production has to say. In the midst of a sewer, life goes on. It may be at the bacterial level, but it is going on nevertheless.

Dramaturg Beate Seidel views that small level of life as crucial to understanding Elisabeth's motivation. She is determined to become independent as a traveling saleslady, to rise above the decay which surrounds her. Thus begins her "little dance of death," because in attempting independence she initiates "a gigantic struggle between herself and a society," according to Seidel. The best she can hope for is "a moment or two to enjoy the illusion of a ceasefire" with a society determined to swallow her. Thus the production proposes that the life process is closely associated with the process of death. That is not exactly an original observation, but in the midst of the complete overhaul this part of Germany is experiencing, the production has found an exposed nerve. It does so by calling attention to the "essentials" of existence which many in the Dresden audience might overlook in their rush to buy new cars, televisions, or washing machines. Those essentials include faith, hope, and charity on the intellectual level, but at the most basic level (this production emphasizes) they are water, fire, wind, and earth.

The production entertains the possibility of transformation in the midst of wholesale collapse. Elisabeth attempts to rise above the putrefaction surrounding her, but she (along with her future) repeatedly falls back into it; by the play's end she has become just another piece of decaying earth. Director Lange presents her audience, in the figure of Elisabeth, with a metaphor for the "new" German who was a citizen of the old German Democratic Republic. You can buy all the gadgets you want, she seems to be saying, you can travel to all the places that were formerly forbidden; in the end you must confront your own meagre faith, hope, or love. The production completely abandons any hint of concrete representation in the performance of that confrontation; it embraces instead a level of the abstract that is, as noted, visually arresting and provocative.

Lange has cast several male characters (the policeman Alfons, the antagonistic Mortician, the decadent Baron, the Accountant, Joachim Prantl, and several minor characters) within the same

age range as Elisabeth to avoid the impression of a broad cross section of society and to negate the idea of a generational conflict. The only characters in their forties or fifties are power figures like the Judge, the Judge's Wife, and Elisabeth's employer, Irene Prantl. The conflict among them all ensues from society's expectations of Elisabeth; the Mortician, for example, wants to become Elisabeth's paramour; society could accept such an arrangement (although he is really more interested in his pigeons, his dead dog, and his terrarium than he is in women), but Elisabeth elects independence from him--even though she takes his money to help her pay off a fine she incurred for selling ladies' underwear without a proper license. Alfons comes to represent Elisabeth's fondest hopes, namely a faith in love. The love scene they share explodes into a trapeze act, staged high above the audience on a swinging chair; it quickly hurtles to the ground when the police detective arrives to arrest Elisabeth for violation of probation. With her love crashes also any faith she had left, faith in other human beings or even faith in herself.

Christiane Heinrich's performance as Elisabeth is marked by ecstatic outbursts and an astounding level of energy maintained throughout the entire performance (it lasts more than two hours and is presented without an intermission). Heinrich lacks the world-weary voice and demeanor one might expect in Elisabeth, but director Lange sees the character metaphorically, and as such she regards her with a measure of optimism. As the mortician, Michael Meister has been allowed to indulge in some extravagant histrionics, most notably with his voice. The result is figure lacking human dimensions, but representing, as director Lange intended, the social forces which destroy Elisabeth. He mirrors the traditional Spießbürger one finds in all Horváth plays, a type Horváth himself described as an "egotistical hypochondriac;" he is brimming with self-pity and narcissism.

As the policeman Alfons Klostermayer, Alexander Schröder carefully avoids any obvious display of self-pity. By the play's end, he seems genuinely mystified why his wife (he had been married earlier; he was attracted to Elisabeth because she looked so much like his deceased spouse) and Elisabeth have died. "I just don't have any luck," he laments; but Schröder tinges the lament with bafflement. His scenes with Heinrich likewise boast a conspicuous lack of self-absorption. They are presented simply as two young people in love; true, it is a very small love, and their hopes are not high, either. But thanks to the trapeze arrangement provided them by designer Walther, hope momentarily takes flight before the police come crashing in. After the police reveal to Alfons the danger Elisabeth poses to his career, Lange places Schröder in groups in order to isolate Heinrich and make her self-destruction appear more inevitable. Yet Elisabeth, as Heinrich plays the character, is not quite ready to give up the ghost. When police bring in her body on the presumption she has drowned herself, Heinrich's energy confounds the audience's tendency at that point to feel sorry for her. The Accountant (whom Lange has conceived as a personification of death) breathes life back into her long enough for the final scene between her and Schröder, and Schröder again resists the temptation to indulge in remorse. "You go and drop yourself into the water, after I stretch my hand out to you," he says, still mystified.

The Accountant sums up the whole mortal affair with the familiar (to German audiences, at least) folk lyric "I live, but know not how much longer./I die, but know not when./I travel on, I know not where/And wonder why I feel so happy." Despite their travails, reasons dramaturg Seidel, the citizens of Dresden have reason to hope that they have a slight chance for happiness. The character Elisabeth is not intended as a literal metaphor for their experience; she dies at the end, but she nevertheless experienced that wonderful flight of freedom. Likewise they too have experienced a brief rush of freedom. Whither their faith, love, and hope now? They of course have

no earthly idea; all they see now (according to Seidel's quote of St. Paul in the production program, and from whom Horváth derived the play's title) as citizens of the new Germany is "through a glass darkly."

*Glaube Liebe Hoffnung* marks the first time a Horváth play has ever been performed in Dresden, a fact remarkable in view of the city's importance as a theatre center. The city has billed itself "The Florence of the North" from the days of August the Strong (1670-1733), who attempted to make the city a showplace for Baroque architecture and an imitation Paris on the absolutist model of Louis XIV. He largely succeeded, though in the process Saxony (of which Dresden is the capital) found itself bankrupt for most of the 18th century. In the 19th century Dresden benefited from the architectural work of Gottfried Semper (1803-1879), who built two opera houses in Dresden. The city was a leading operatic center in the 1840s, largely due to the presence of Richard Wagner (1813-1883), who premiered four operas here.

In the 1920s Dresden was home to at least seven theatres, though none of them were particularly noted for premiering new plays. That Horváth has never been performed here is a reflection of the repressive cultural policy of the old German Democratic Republic; productions of *Geschichten aus dem Wienerwald* and of *Kasimir und Karoline* took place in East Germany after the "Horváth revival" in the late 1960s, but those productions did not run for long. Horváth was regarded as both decadent and inconsequential.

"Censorship in the German Democratic Republic was a subtle thing," says Dieter Görne, Intendant of the Staatsschauspiel Dresden, a position he has held since October of 1990. "No one was ever forbidden to present certain plays, but we all knew that some would not be looked upon with favor." Finding and producing the "right" kinds of plays now is furthermore a more daunting

task than the same task was five years ago, before “die Wende,” the term most often employed to describe East Germany’s collapse. The term had its first usage here in Dresden, when thousands of people marched through the streets in October of 1989, demanding freedom of assembly, expression, and travel. Egon Krenz (head of the Socialist Unity Party in Dresden and the man chosen to replace Erich Honnecker as head of the Party throughout the German Democratic Republic) used “die Wende” to describe what was going on in Dresden and what he hoped would be a change in East-West German relations. Krenz had no idea how big a change there was to come.

The word *Wende* means “turnaround” or “transition,” but it does not even approximate a description of what happened in peoples’ lives after 1989, Görne adds. Prior to November, 1989 the theatres were packed every night; afterwards, they were completely empty. “I don’t know where they went,” Görne affably admits. “Maybe they went shopping, or maybe they took trips to Ireland. Maybe they spent all their money on American cigarettes and Japanese televisions. When they came back they were much more selective. They didn’t automatically come to see whatever we offered, as in the old days.”

In the “old days,” going to the theatre was a treat everyone could afford, and theatre attendance was an occasion of which East Germans could rightfully boast. In Dresden, for example (as well as in most other GDR cities), one could have a sumptuous dinner in the theatre restaurant at prices everyone could afford; one could then see a superbly designed, directed, and moderately well acted production of Schiller, Kleist, or maybe Gorki at prices which were lower than seeing a movie. Theatre-going was a national pastime, if not a national passion, in the GDR. Görne has called the relationship between theatres and audiences an “entente cordiale” in a recent issue of *Die*



*deutsche Bühne*; performances were often “events” nevertheless, in which social protest and political criticism could be heard, if faintly.

Those days are gone in more than just the historical sense. They are barely a memory in the minds of many audience members, because they are too busy now trying to make a living. Professionals like doctors, lawyers, engineers, and teachers (who made up the bulk of the *Staatsschauspiel*'s audience under the GDR regime) now find themselves burdened with previously unthinkable workloads. “The paperwork alone has doubled,” says Görne. “Doctors, for example, never had to fill out insurance forms before. Now they’re in their offices until 7:30 at night trying to catch up.” Industrial workers, if they are fortunate enough to be working at all, are likewise too strapped for time and money to afford what is now the “luxury” of theatre attendance. Though ticket prices have escalated dramatically, they still do not even approach a level where the box office is expected to finance much of the theatre’s operation. The *Staatsschauspiel Dresden* will receive DM 25 million this year (nearly 19 million dollars, and that amount is intended only current production costs), an amount that represents a 93% subsidy of operations. The renovation of the theatre, a process begun in 1993 with plans for completion in 1995, is paid for from even larger government accounts.

The generous subvention this theatre enjoys is typical of government support for theatre in Saxony and throughout the German-speaking world generally. “We have historically believed in theatre as a ‘moral institution,’” says Görne, “and I don’t think any German government is ready to embrace the kind of theatre system under which America operates.” At the same time, Görne recognizes that with subvention comes expectation. The theatre is to be the brief and abstract chronicle of the times, but how is it to do that when the times are so fraught with change?

The theatre must first of all help its audience confront the enormous, almost unprecedented psychological barrier of German reunification. The lives of every former East German citizen have changed to an extent nobody could possibly have imagined, says Görne. But theatre can't throw in the towel and present only light comedies and musicals--yet neither can it "throw salt in the wounds," according to Görne. It must look for ways to rebuild its audience while challenging it at the same time. Part of the rebuilding process is *The Rocky Horror Show* and *Es liegt in der Luft*, musicals which have attracted large followings and would have been simply unthinkable five years ago.

Görne naturally views the reunification of Germany from the standpoint of someone who spent his entire adult life under a system that he freely admits could not have lasted much longer. "Did you notice all the dilapidated apartment buildings on your way over here?" he asked. They were in fine shape after the war, but they were allowed to disintegrate over the years until finally, nobody could live in them. They are a kind of emblem for the whole system. It would have collapsed in on itself after a while anyway; meantime the citizens who lived under that system now find themselves in what the Intendant picturesquely describes as a "voluntary subjugation." His job, along with that of his colleagues, is to create theatre for an audience made up of people who have taken on the capitalist burden, who find themselves laboring and more heavily laden they ever expected to be.

"The plain fact is," says his colleague and dramaturg Beate Seidel, "our side lost." She was born and grew up in a system she knew was in competition with the West, one who was taught in school that America was the "heart of the beast" against whom their noble struggle was directed. "But then I started seeing American movies, which I found fascinating. Now I thank God twice a day for the revolution." Her gratitude is understandable, but what does it do to help her create

productions for the Dresden audience? The implication is that the revolution she personally experienced plays a large role in helping her to find plays and develop approaches to them that “legitimize” the upheaval audiences members are experiencing. “The best example so far,” says Seidel, “is Ibsen’s *Lady from the Sea*. Before the revolution, very few theatres did the play. But in the figure of Ellida Wangel audience members perhaps saw a bit of themselves.” This woman has a history that Ibsen saw needed telling. Audiences identified with her and with her sufferings, sensing that their story was being told, too.

The same may be true of Elisabeth in the current production of *Glaube Liebe Hoffnung*, says Seidel. “She is a person who is at a loss to know exactly where her life is headed. She has some hope that it will turn out all right, but mostly she’s at sixes and sevens with herself.” A similar situation exists in *Miss Julie* by Strindberg, says Seidel, which may explain why it went over so well with Dresden audiences. These plays feature characters who, like many audience members, have a longing they can’t adequately articulate.

On the other hand, some productions experience no resonance whatsoever with audiences and are forced to close after a few performances. That was the case with both *Engagement for a Clown* by the Romanian playwright Matei Visniec and *Eiszeit* by Tankred Dorst. Both productions were critically well received, but audiences showed little interest in them. The former dealt with unemployed clowns, which “came a little too close for comfort,” says Seidel. It furthermore resembled Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* too closely, because it was so abstract. The same may be said of the Dorst play which, like Pinter’s *The Caretaker* (the play it most closely resembles), takes place in a non-concrete set of circumstances.

Then there is *Rocky Horror*. A big hit, but its success aggravates many intellectuals who wonder why taxpayers’ money must support “boulevard triviality.” If theatre is to rebuild its

audience in Dresden, however, such productions are a good idea. The situation here resembles the state of German theatre immediately after World War II, when plays long since forbidden under the Nazis were extensively produced. Before long, *Rocky Horror* will no longer seem so exotic. Can *Phantom of the Opera* be far behind? The venerable Semper Oper seems like the perfect a perfect venue for it. After all, taxpayer money paid for Wagner's premieres of *Rienzi*, *Tannhäuser*, *Der fliegende Holländer*, and *Lohengrin* at the Semper; though Wagner was forced to flee Dresden after those premieres due to a political revolution, musical extravaganzas by Andrew Lloyd Webber would not seem revolutionary. Dresden has had its revolution, both in the streets and in its theatre; what theatre artists here hope to do is find ways by which they and their fellow citizens can throw off the yoke of "voluntary subjugation," while keeping some parts of the revolution's fervor intact. "The last thing I hope to see in Dresden," says actress Christiane Heinrich, "is the situation they have in the former West Germany, where actors are civil servants with job security. They phone in their performances and couldn't care less about their audiences."

--William Grange