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Rev. of *Theatre Under the Nazis*, Ed. John London.

William Grange

University of Nebraska, wgrange@unl.edu

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Theatre Under the Nazis. Ed. John London. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000. 356 pp., 30 ill. ISBN 0-7190-5912-7 hardback; 0-71905991-7 paperback.

John London's edition of six essays attempts no comprehensive estimation of theatre under the Nazis as one might assume from the title, but rather provides six valuable windows through which one may glimpse sometimes startling illustrations of how political forces can easily overcome and subdue artistic expression, exploit idealism for totalitarian purposes, and give the sheen of political correctness to cultural perversion. The book is, in summary, a valuable addition to a growing body of work on the subject of theatre and theatre practice in the Third Reich.

London's useful preview of the articles in his Introduction cites examples of various outrages, aesthetic opinion, and various methods of control the Nazis employed. He notes that as early as 1899 numerous German and Austrian critics were complaining that German-language theatre had fallen victim to a Jewish conspiracy. In the first third of the twentieth century several book-length studies appeared, lamenting the loss of "German" values in theatre art. By the 1920s, Jewish theatre artists regularly encountered vituperative reproach in print; Nazi attacks grew in number and audacity, including student-led disruptions of stagings by Max Reinhardt. Unofficial anti-Semitic tendencies in the theatre reached a high point just before 1933, when the Nazis gained control of the national government. A Propaganda Ministry, established soon thereafter, was the logical outcome of numerous trends in German cultural life. London states that Walter Stang, Rainer Schlösser, and other functionaries in the Propaganda Ministry—the government agency which charged its various "Chambers" with regulating artistic expression—were "vehement anti-modernists," even though they espoused a modernism distinctly similar to bellicose Futurists and messianic Expressionists who preceded them.

The two principal aims of the Theatre Chamber were to “facilitate ideological-bureaucratic control” and “accelerate the exclusion of undesirables.” The Theatre Chamber also sought to lionize the work of artists bureaucratically considered agreeable. They included Mary Wigman, whose “call of blood which involves us all” figured largely in her choreography for the 1936 Olympics. Wigman was by no means the only anti-Semite with *bona fide* artistic qualifications, and London provides valuable examples of many whose attempts to salvage careers in the postwar period often met with widespread public approval. “After all,” he notes, “You cannot assign an entire profession to the moral scrapheap.” Artists who had enjoyed regular employment under the regime, such as Erich Engel and Caspar Neher, found open arms and abundant work opportunities in the German Democratic Republic, thanks largely to that one-time Nazi demon Bertolt Brecht. In the west, Gustaf Gründgens could not begin his performances upon his release from a Russian prison camp because audiences were delirious with delight at seeing him again on stage, giving him standing ovations the instant he appeared onstage. When Heinz Rühmann, like Gründgens an illustrious film and theatre career behind him in the Nazi period, was asked in a 1987 television interview if he would have done anything differently, said he “would do exactly what he had done”—to the vigorous applause of the studio audience.

William Niven’s chapter inspects a subject of persistent interest to English-speaking readers, though it was of debatable significance during the Third Reich. The outdoor mass spectacles called *Thing*-drama hold a continuing fascination for many English-speaking readers, perhaps because an odor of the occult frequently suffused the proceedings. *Thing* is a Germanic/Norse word meaning “place of judgement,” and the construction of *Thingplätze*, or venues of those judgements, began soon after 1933. The *Thing*-plays were mass spectacles,

employing apocalyptic motifs, symbols, and structures to gratify a tribal sense of cosmic significance.

In his treatment of history plays during the Third Reich, Glen Gadberry provides fascinating examples of bogus history rendered in theatrical form. These plays fell short of fully rigged propaganda, but they did provide opportunities for playwrights publicly to air various preoccupations or, as Gadberry says, their “reassessments of the historical record.” Gadberry also provides a valuable appendix of performance data about history plays in the Third Reich, noting premiere dates, directors, designers, and leading cast members. He also presents performance numbers during the season in which those plays premiered; those numbers reveal how utterly unprofitable those productions were for the theatres that staged them.

Erik Levi’s assessment of opera in the Third Reich recounts the predictable popularity of Richard Wagner, but also the “leading beneficiaries” of a regime policy which sought to “reward the most prominent of its musical supporters.” Those included the now justifiably forgotten composers Max von Schillings, Paul Graener, and Georg Vollerthun. The nearly 150 new operas premiered in the Nazi era were mostly in “a vein of escapist late Romanticism,.” though perhaps the most notable among them was Heinrich Sutermeister’s *Romeo and Juliet*, which premiered in 1940. It was performed throughout the country for the next two years and seems to have enjoyed a genuine popularity among audiences. Levi, like Gadberry, provides a valuable appendix of opera premieres, and of significant revivals, at the end of chapter.

Rebecca Rovit revisits the curious circumstances surrounding the establishment and ultimate dissolution of the Jewish Cultural League in Berlin. Exactly why the mercurial and utterly unpredictable cultural hierarchy fostered such an organization in the first place is unclear,

but Rovit explores the question, comparing the Berlin organization with similar undertakings in Hamburg and Frankfurt. She concludes that most of the organizations' energy derived from a spiritual source. That is what allowed Jewish leaders "room for negotiation" with Nazi bigwigs—despite an official policy of suppressing any play that "stressed Jewish political or religious power." A remarkable exception to the policy was a 1938 production of *The Trial* by Shulamit Batdori, a Jewess living in Palestine. She wrote the play in Hebrew in 1936, about an Arab attack on a kibbutz; the closing scene featured a young British soldier, an Arab youth, and a Jewish settler who question the possibility of peaceful co-existence between Jews and Arabs.

In his chapter, editor London provides a lucubration on non-German drama in the Third Reich, the unquestioned luminary of which was George Bernard Shaw. Shaw enjoyed an esteem, and a frequency in theatre repertoires, that only Shakespeare could match. But since Shakespeare was considered a German playwright, Shaw's closest rivals were Ibsen and Goldoni. Ibsen benefited not only from being a "Nordic" playwright and thus enfolded within the pan-German camp, but also from the Dietrich Eckart translation of his *Peer Gynt*. Eckart was an alcoholic scholiast in Munich who befriended Hitler in that city's beer halls after World War I. His translation became a Nazi standard; many of Ibsen's other plays enjoyed extensive production too, though during the war years Goebbels banned *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts* because they were "too depressing." Oscar Wilde was also popular, and indeed three films of his plays appeared under Nazi studio aegis. London concludes his chapter with a discussion of possible "anti-Nazi" Shakespeare productions, focussing on the stupendous 1938 Jürgen Fehling production of *Richard III*, starring Werner Krauss.

The book's concluding chapter is perhaps its most unusual. In it, William Abbey and Katharine Havekamp examine the German theatre in Lille, providing a fascinating glimpse of German-language performance not only in that city but elsewhere in territories the German army occupied after annexation or military conquest. The German theatre in Lille was actually conquered twice, first in 1915 and again in 1940. But the Lille theatre was more than just a venue for entertaining troops. It was to serve as an outpost of German culture and "underline the long-term nature of Germany's commitment to the area," enjoying subsidies from the Propaganda Ministry comparable to theatres its size in Germany proper. Like most other theatres its size in Germany, it too relied on popular fare instead of German classics to pay the bills and fill the house. Comedies like Zerkaulen's *A Break from Routine* and *A Touch of Grey* by Leo Lenz and the von Schönthan perennial *The Rape of the Sabine Women* had the added benefit of being completely uncontroversial. The troupe in Lille did a total of 3,889 performances, averaging about eighty four per cent of seating capacity. The Lille operation shared analogous cultural goals with its counterparts in The Hague and in Oslo, which hoped to draw the local Germanic populations. None of them had any marked success in that regard, and all of them died when the German occupation ended.

The policy of attempting to bestow German culture on a conquered populace is a curious artifact of both theatre and military history, dating from a nineteenth century conviction which the theatre historian and director Max Martersteig described as the quixotic desire among his countrymen "to help fulfill the awakening and transmission of a humane Germanic culture to the rest of the world." The Nazis enthusiastically adopted a version of that desire, but they perversely turned it into a travesty from which German theatre culture has never fully recovered.

That the Nazi version of that culture was anything but humane is evident in every chapter of this valuable book.

—William Grange