

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Faculty Publications and Creative Activity, School
of Theatre and Film

Theatre and Film, Johnny Carson School of

2000

Rev. of *Moissi: Triest, Berlin, New York: eine Schauspielerlegende* by Rüdiger Schaper. A biography of the legendary actor Alexander Moissi.

William Grange

University of Nebraska, wgrange@unl.edu

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



Part of the [Acting Commons](#), and the [Theatre History Commons](#)

Grange, William, "Rev. of *Moissi: Triest, Berlin, New York: eine Schauspielerlegende* by Rüdiger Schaper. A biography of the legendary actor Alexander Moissi." (2000). *Faculty Publications and Creative Activity, School of Theatre and Film*. 25.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/theatrefacpub/25>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Theatre and Film, Johnny Carson School of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications and Creative Activity, School of Theatre and Film by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Schaper, Rüdiger. *Moissi: Triest, Berlin, New York: eine Schauspielerlegende*. Berlin: Argon, 2000. ISBN: 3870245131 9783870245139. 255 pp.

This book is a great read for a number of reasons, the most significant of which is the author's demonstration that Alexander Moissi (Alessandro Moissi, 1879-1935) was the German-speaking theatre's first modern actor. That dubious distinction Moissi may have shared with Josef Kainz, Alexander Granach, Peter Lorre and a few others, but there is little doubt that Moissi was among the twentieth century's first German-speaking superstars. Unlike most of the great German actors before him, Moissi was not a native German speaker. He was born in Albania and grew up speaking Greek and Italian; he had a forty-year career that earned him millions of dollars in performances all over the world. In none of those performances did Moissi lose the Mediterranean inflections in the language of Goethe and Schiller. But that did not diminish his stature; it enhanced it. Near the end of his career, film director Ernst Lubitsch approached him in Hollywood to plead, "Herr Moissi, please allow me to embrace you, so that people will think I am somebody!"

Moissi is nowadays almost completely forgotten. Who remembers that he was Max Reinhardt's most frequently cast star in Berlin? Who recalls his innumerable deaths onstage as Romeo, Hamlet, Danton, and the suicidal Fedya in Tolstoy's *The Living Corpse*? For that matter, who even recognizes that play's title anymore? And who summons to memory Max Reinhardt himself, that "Barnum of the theatre" who created what critic Karl Kraus called "epoch-making humbug"? Reinhardt initiated Moissi's transformation from a provincial cafe singer to an international star by insisting on a new pronunciation for "Moissi." In Berlin, he was no longer to be Mo-ees-si, but Moi-ssi, emphasizing the *moi*, as in "me."

Reinhardt liked Moissi's accent. It was foreign, but Reinhardt Moissi's *chutzpa* in speaking that way before a Berlin audience. Reinhardt often cast foreigners—Hungarians, Russians, Poles, even Americans—because the director sought an alternative to “high German” stage speech. Moissi became his emblematic alternative in distinctive premieres as Orestes in Hofmannsthal's *Elektra*, Danton in Büchner's *Dantons Tod*, Henri in Schnitzler's *Der grüne Kakadu*, and in Gorky's *The Lower Depths* (the first play Moissi did for Reinhardt). In these roles Moissi put himself on display as much as he created a character, and as such he became the first of a twentieth century type, the man who, according Schaper, exhibits his own existence as a work of art, “a soul in the process of decomposition.”

Decay and disease have long been thematic staples of modernist drama, and Berlin's critics were among the first to recognize Moissi's superb facility at portraying them. Schaper estimates that Moissi died over 5,000 times, and to each of his doomed characters he brought a distinct modernist sensibility. Modernist apologists like Herbert Ihering, Julius Bab and Siegfried Jacobsohn were among Moissi's most ardent advocates, who felt he arrived at, or perhaps personified the moment when (as Schaper says) “psychology broke into art. It was that moment when drama penetrated industrial society and promptly went into crisis mode, where it has remained ever since.”

Reinhardt saw in Moissi an expedient by which he could penetrate Berlin's theatre Establishment and leaving a lasting impression. When he bought the Deutsches Theater from Adolph L'Arronge for 2.5 million marks and made that theatre his permanent base of operations, he gambled on an unabridged production of Wedekind's *Spring's Awakening* and an almost Expressionistic staging of Ibsen's *Ghosts*. Reinhardt transformed them into blockbusters, and in

both productions Moissi played the leading male role. Several observers thereafter proclaimed Moissi as the “new” Josef Kainz, but unlike Kainz, Moissi was “the protagonist of the young, strife-torn, depravity-seeking twentieth century.” Kainz was an heroic figure with whose suffering the audience was enthralled. Moissi’s suffering and deaths were themselves the objects of fascination. When Moissi played Oswald in *Ghosts*, his death throes started early (in the second act) and tottered on to the play’s conclusion. In the final scene, “as if Edvard Munch had done the blocking or painted the *mise-en-scene*,” he finally managed to flounder into the lap of the great Agnes Sorma (as Mrs. Oswald) and gurgle, “May I sit near you mother? . . . I am the living dead!” It was “a modernist Pietá, as a Mediterranean Messiah took up took up his cross his began his *via dolorosa*, a naked individual, *Ecce homo* alone and abandoned, the ‘modern man.’”

Moissi is one of the few actors to have performed with Franz Kafka (1883-1924) in the audience and to have the novelist describe his performance—though Kafka was not particularly kind in his description of what he saw. Of a poetry reading Moissi gave in 1912, Kafka wrote, “Shameless tricks and contrivances, casting gazes at the floor, singing the beginning parts of lines, using odd pauses and stops, then running his voice up and down melodically. [He] apparently got the tip of his tongue in between the words so he can make a little whistle—which forces you to look upwards toward the ceiling [in embarrassment], when your spirits should be lifted instead.” Kafka also did not appreciate Moissi’s habit of sitting while reading poetry instead standing, as was then the norm. “You can’t see his face,” and “his voice seems unconnected to his body. The words come out like a small boat adrift on the water.” Franz Werfel on the other hand, waxed enthusiastic about Moissi, calling him a “magician” whose

voice was filled with “loving entreaty, slovenly charm, [and] a sing-song supplication spoken during sleep It has a narcotic effect.” Stefan Zweig liked it, too: “The voice flatters itself; rolling like a cat with a ball of yarn on a flight of stairs, up and down the octaves, touching on notes, playing the entire scale of the throat. Sometimes you close your eyes just to get the full effect of the voice. . . .” Moissi’s eyes were equally impressive. They were the kind “you see on “an Egyptian mummy case, wide open, unspeakably tragic, yet uncomplaining.”

Moissi’s Fedya in Tolstoy’s *The Living Corpse* became his trademark in the 1920s, the same way Chaplin’s little tramp or Josephine Baker’s banana costume became trademarks. Moissi played Fedya over 1500 times in Europe, the Americas, and in Asia. His performances of Fedya, Schaper says, fulfilled Nietzsche’s prophecy: God is dead, art has displaced the church, and the individual celebrates his apotheosis in order to start in motion a concomitant process of decay. “The actor dies for the masses, and if this actor is playing Fedya, the actor is spreading the gospel of a besotted Messiah, glowing with idealistic self-pity and proclaiming self-extinction.” Moissi never really studied acting to achieve such effects. “I am always Moissi, whether I’m slipping into the hell of a distraught, tortured Hamlet or of a weak, defenseless Fedya—both are a part of myself.” New York critics in the 1920s nonetheless hailed Moissi as “Europe’s greatest living actor,” “the man with the golden voice,” and “the John Barrymore of the Old World.” John Barrymore had, as it turns out, also played Fedya, but “Barrymore has thousands lying at his feet,” Schaper quotes one critic, “but Moissi has, in Berlin, Paris, Moscow, Rome, Vienna, and Salzburg, his tens of thousands.”

One of the most remarkable accounts in this remarkable book is Schaper's description of Moissi's wartime experience as a German fighter pilot in 1915, when the actor was at the height of his fame. Moissi had immediately volunteered for the German armed forces in 1914 when mobilization was declared and joined the air force after qualifying for pilot's training. In 1915 he and his co-pilot were shot down over England, where they had flown in error. Moissi was then transferred to a prisoner-of-war camp in France, where he remained until 1917. In the wake of the German defeat, Moissi was frequently confronted with his non-German status and taunted in the press, his service to Germany in its armed forces notwithstanding. The Nazis in particular attacked Moissi for his "non-German" background, and their attacks on him forced his career, like the plane he piloted over England, into a downward spiral until 1931. That was when Reinhardt, himself under withering fire from the Nazis, briefly brought Moissi's career out of its tailspin and cast him in the title role of Hofmannsthal's *Everyman* for the Salzburg festival. Moissi remained in that role for the next four years and died splendidly at the close of each performance, but the festival provided only about six weeks of steady work. When the Nazis came to power, Moissi's career in Germany was over. He tried film work but was too old to play leading man parts by the time sound film came in, and early sound technology in film could never do justice to his voice.

Moissi therefore continued to tour in Central Europe, "resembling Eleanora Duse playing Camille and other trademark roles in deadening repetition." Meantime in his native Albania, King Zogu accorded him state citizenship and called upon him to be Master of Ceremonies at his court. Zogu had ordered a seven-pound crown to be made of solid gold for his coronation, and wanted Moissi to be his court jester. Moissi declined the offer and remained on tour, where he

died “for real” of pulmonary edema aboard a train, shortly after he had died onstage for what turned out to be the last time.

—William Grange