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Heinz Hilpert: the Revitalization of German Theatre after World War II

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When Heinz Hilpert died in Göttingen on 25 November 1967 at the age of seventy-seven, obituary notices throughout the German-speaking world hailed him as the last of the great theatre directors, a group that had included Otto Brahm, Max Reinhardt, Leopold Jessner, Jürgen Fehling, Erich Engel, and Gustaf Gründgens. As early as 1931, numerous critics considered him perhaps the best director in Berlin, second only to Reinhardt himself.¹ Hilpert had indeed succeeded Reinhardt as Intendant of the Deutsches Theater in Berlin in 1933; when he did so he pledged himself to the task of preserving the Deutsches Theater as an institution dedicated to artistic excellence. Skeptics have since doubted Hilpert's sincerity in making that pledge, and many have sometimes assumed that opportunism was the principal motive behind Hilpert's agreement with Nazi authorities to manage Berlin's most prestigious ensemble. Reinhardt himself had no doubts; in a letter from Venice dated 7 October Reinhardt wrote:

Lieber Heinz Hilpert!

Aus dieser unwahrscheinlich stillen Stadt, in der ich zu kurzer Rast eingekehrt bin, schicke ich Ihnen meinen herzlichen Dank für Ihre guten Wünsche und für Ihre ganze Haltung mir gegenüber.

Ein alter Theatermann kennt das Schaukeln von seinen Brettern her und weiss, dass es kein Leben ohne Auf und Nieder gibt. Er wundert sich auch nicht, dass die meisten Menschen sich dabei verfärben. Umso froher grüsst er den Kameraden, der fest auf seinen Beinen steht, den Sturm nicht fürchtet, sondern ihn beherrscht.

In aufrichtiger Zuneigung Ihr

Max Reinhardt.²

Hilpert remained at the helm of the Deutsches Theater until 1944, and concurrently ran both the Theater in der Josefstadt and the Deutsches Theater after 1938. He accepted directorial assignments in Zürich, Frankfurt am Main, and Konstanz during the immediate postwar period and became

Intendant of the “Deutsches Theater in Göttingen” in 1950; he remained at this post until his retirement in 1966. He continued, however, to direct in Austria, Switzerland, and the Federal Republic to the end of his life. During his lifetime he was the recipient of numerous awards, citations, and prizes given by various cultural and governmental organizations in both the Federal and Democratic Republics; since his death little attention has been paid to him or to the substantial contributions he made both as a theoretician and as a director. This paper examines both his theory and his practice and attempts to evaluate his place in German theatre history.

Hilpert first outlined his theories in an essay titled “Was ich möchte” in 1932. Numerous essays in periodicals and books were to follow, but essentially he never wavered from the stance he took in that first disquisition. Hilpert’s outlook took its direction from an admiration of men whose work he greatly respected; these included the actors Josef Kainz and Oskar Sauer, the actor-director Friedrich Kayssler, and most importantly, the director Otto Brahm. Like Brahm, Hilpert was a foe of effect and sensation and a friend of modesty and truth on the stage. “In der Kunst,” stated Hilpert, “die geistige Linie eines Stückes herauszuarbeiten, und der Naturkraft grosser schauspielerischen Talente zum Ausdruck zu verhelfen, ist mir Otto Brahm Vorbild und Lehrmeister geblieben.”³ Hilpert’s admiration for Brahm greatly influenced his own outlook as a director: “ich möchte dahin wirken,” said Hilpert, “dass beim Theater das Bild wichtiger ist als der Rahmen, der Dichter wichtiger als die aktive Behandlung des Publikums, der zum ganzen gereifte Schauspieler wichtiger als der prosthetische Versteller wird.”⁴ Hilpert’s theatre, like Brahm’s, was thus an institution dedicated to creating an experience shared by everyone in the house. “Ein Theater, das nicht in erster Linie ein ‘Menschenhaus’ ist, ist kein Theater. Die unvergesslichen Abende des Theaters sind die, in denen Menschen gemeinsam lachen, gemeinsam Behagen oder Furcht oder Hoffnung geniessen. Das ist nur möglich, wo die Gemeinsamheit von Dichter, Darsteller, und Regisseur Lebenssubstanzen und Fragen gestalten, die die Zuschauer alle angehen.”⁵

Hilpert adumbrated his ideal theatre as one “religious” in nature, and he frequently implied that the audience was like a congregation. This religious theatre, he said, “erwirkt in seinen besten Stunden, dass alle Menschen von ihm in der obersten Galleriereihe bis zur hintersten Bühnenwand zu einer Erlebniseinheit, zu einer Erlebnisgemeinschaft zusammengeschlossen werden.”⁶ Yet this was not a theatre that provided answers for its audience, nor did it advocate any particular point of view; instead, it provided the individual with an opportunity through communal experience “selbständig ein kleines Stück unentdeckten Landes aus seinem inneren Dunkel ins Überlickbare zu bringen.”⁷ While he acknowledged that theatre might be used as a pulpit for all kinds of political, social, or even economic points of view, Hilpert urged the growth of the individual. Creating a congregation for an evening by uniting individuals might improve the human condition, but such incremental improvement was the limit to theatre’s ability as a socializing institution. The key to a “religious experience” in the theatre lay with the individual consciousness, and too much responsibility for the

individual had been taken over by institutions anyway, he felt. The individual, as a result, had become cut off from the rest of humanity; with this isolation a kind of existential anxiety had set in, and the individual's connection to his fellow human beings and indeed to life itself had become constricted.⁸

Hilpert's advocacy of the individual put him in almost diametric opposition to the views of Brecht, whose voice has often been the loudest and whose theories have frequently enjoyed an eager acceptance in the postwar period. Whereas Brecht's theatre was mostly a social phenomenon, one addressed to a "mass consciousness," Hilpert envisioned a theatre "das teils durch den Dichter geschaffen, durch den Schauspieler gestaltet, durch den Regisseur in allen Teilen licht und leuchtend gemacht wird . . . jenes, das hinter dem Bewusstseinschattenspiel der gedanklich erfassbaren, dinglichen Welt die tiefere Wirklichkeit der Wesen und Mächte aufleuchten lässt — die Beziehungen zum Sinn, zur Lebenswurzel, zu Gott — also zur schöpferischen Urkraft."⁹ In other words, Hilpert's theatre was one that would create Schiller's sense of the sublime, a momentary reality that transcended everyday concerns and uplifted the individual human being, however briefly, for a glimpse into the noumenal realm of truth, beauty, and reconciliation.

The revelation of Hilpert's noumenal reality lay anchored in the word; his faith in language led him to emphasize clarity, simplicity, and modesty in production. The best director, he said, was one who disappeared anonymously behind the work of the playwright. "Der beste Regisseur," he said, "so leitet seine Schauspieler, dass sie dem Werk und dem Wort demütig dienen . . . Er kann das Publikum dahin bringen, das Werk so zu sehen, wie es der Dichter gewollt hat, und nicht so, wie Willkür und Absicht es nach dahin oder dorthin ausdeuten konnten."¹⁰ The director's work was, in fact, the specific topic of a 1943 Hilpert essay. He stated then that if one could determine who had directed a production, the entire effort was a failure: "Regisseure, über deren Arbeit hinaus man wertvolle Stücke als belanglos empfindet, aber ihre Arbeit sensationell, sind häufig die Mörder des Theaters. . . ." ¹¹ With this statement he broke completely with the highly decorative style of Reinhardt; he acknowledged nevertheless that the director was the essential shaper of the modern theatre, and he believed, as did Reinhardt, that every play should dictate its own style and that stylistic excrescences were at times even helpful in explicating the playwright's work. What he objected to was style for its own sake.¹² He cited Kleist's *Amphytrion*, for example, as a play located in Thebes but predominantly Prussian in spirit. To obstruct the play with overly Grecian nuances would detract from the playwright's intent. Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* was likewise neither an Egyptian nor a Roman play, but a portrayal of two worlds in conflict; an overabundance of Egyptian or Roman motifs would simply call attention to the director's comprehension of the conflict and not to the conflict itself.

Hilpert's theories filled a need in the German theatre during the postwar period, and the importance of his theories has never been fully appreciated. The German theatre in 1945 was both financially and spiritually bankrupt;

in that year Hilpert wrote what was perhaps his most poignant essay, which he titled "Vom Sinn und Wesen des Theaters in unserer Zeit". In this essay he stated, "Es dürfte keine Stunde in unserem Tun und Lassen geben, die nicht konfessionell wäre. Es hat auch kein Sinn, das, was war, zu hassen. . . . Wir müssen diese schwere aber selige Arbeit unseres inneren Wachstums leisten. Wie lange schon haben wir sie vernachlässigt."¹³ He recognized that material rebuilding had to take place, but he felt that renewed material well-being unaccompanied by spiritual renewal would be meaningless. He therefore traveled throughout the western occupation zones in 1945 and 1946 reading his essay to groups of students, municipal gatherings, church services, and even in prisoner-of-war camps. Wherever he went he stressed a role of the theatre within the community as a means to help Germans confront their past and to help them deal with what then seemed like a bleak future. He urged the formation of troupes to tour the countryside, and many of the troupes that subsequently developed played not only in villages and towns but in the larger cities as well.

Hilpert felt that the theatre should be instrumental in the rebuilding of Germany; the first step was confronting the past, and Hilpert's own contribution to that effort was his production of Carl Zuckmayer's *Des Teufels General*. Hilpert gave the play its world première in Zürich on 26 December 1946, and he presented it for the first time in Germany at the Frankfurt am Main stock exchange (all the city's theatres had been either destroyed or severely damaged) one year later. The productions created an uproar, for they confronted audiences with a Luftwaffe commander who had made a compact with the devil, and Hilpert's production discovered many cosignatories among the audience. The production, however, remained true to Hilpert's philosophy: it did not polemicize, it did not espouse any political viewpoint, nor did it preach any social dogma. It tried instead to deal with the truth of German existence during the Nazi period. As a result it created controversy and attracted widespread attention.

Hilpert attracted attention not only with his productions but also with his methods of production, especially with his financial methods. He had attempted to set up theatres in Frankfurt am Main and in Konstanz after the war, but in both of these locations financial and bureaucratic pressures became insuperable. Before the war, theatres such as the Deutsches Theater in Berlin were privately owned and received no subsidy from the state.¹⁴ Other theatres such as the municipal stages of Frankfurt and of Konstanz were actually agencies of city government. After the war, private theatres simply had no resources to hire a resident company, and municipal stages, while subsidized, were burdened with a cumbersome, often unsympathetic bureaucracy in city hall. The situation that Hilpert encountered in Göttingen was similar to that in other towns and cities in the Federal Republic: municipal officials were prepared to subsidize theatre operations, but not to an extent that would cover expenses for an entire season. Hilpert presented Göttingen with a unique proposal; he envisioned a "theatre corporation" that would lease the existing theatre building, produce plays, and administer



The director Heinz Hilpert in 1966.



Werner Krauss in Hilpert's world premiere production of Zuckmayer's *Der Hauptmann von Koepenick* (*The Captain of Koepenick*), Deutsches Theater, Berlin, 1931.



Hilpert's world premiere production of Zuckmayer's *Des Teufels General* (*The Devil's General*), Zürich Schauspielhaus, 1946. Gustav Knuth (standing) as General Harras and Robert Bichler as Lieutenant Hartmann.

operations totally independent of municipal government, thereby sparing the government maintenance and managerial expense. City officials were at first reluctant to give up direct control of the theatre; then they discovered how much money it would save them. Hilpert accepted an initial outlay from the city in 1950, and then began to finance the rest of his seasons with income from tours to surrounding communities and from the Göttingen box office.

Hilpert's "theatre corporation" scheme proved so successful that Gustaf Gründgens in Düsseldorf set up an organization almost identical to it, and during the 1950s strong, independent, local corporations developed throughout the Federal Republic along the lines of Hilpert's original plan. Traditional theatre centers like Berlin, Hamburg, and Munich regained their prominence due in large measure to small, innovative theatre corporations operating alongside established theatres; smaller cities like Aachen, Bochum, Essen, and many others engendered groups that continue to be productive. This kind of decentralization has given the Federal Republic the most active theatre life of any country in the world: there are at present approximately 340 theatre buildings actively in use, along with 235 theatre corporations similar to the one Hilpert founded in 1950.¹⁵

Hilpert's style of production was also imitated after the war because it maintained artistic integrity yet enabled theatres to save money. His productions emphasized modesty in size and tautness of execution; set and costume designs were often suggestive rather than literal. The première of Zuckmayer's *Der Gesang im Feuerofen*, for example, featured symbolic levels and backdrops rather than realistic aesthetically overwrought scenic embellishments. His production of Schiller's *Kabale und Liebe* provided few literal components of the Baroque age in which the play is set, but essentially "an iron-clad faithfulness to Schiller's text and a few ruffles here and there."¹⁶ The fact that his productions were extremely popular with audiences and critics helped the box office, too. So did his manipulation of performance schedules to get the most from his actors. Actors not performing on a given night were sent to a nearby community with an excerpt of another production in the repertoire, which thereby generated more income for the theatre. Hilpert himself gave readings in the theatre for school groups and civic organizations in an effort to balance his cash flow.

Heinz Hilpert's expansive vision of the theatre thus became a major revitalizing factor in German theatre life for three principal reasons. First of all, his theories and ideas were comprehensible and accessible to most persons even remotely interested in the theatre in Germany at the time; there is very little intellectual exclusivity or high-minded philosophizing in them. Audiences and performers in a shattered society readily endorsed Hilpert's advocacy of a theatre based upon clarity, faithfulness to the text, and a humane consciousness of community. Secondly, his skill at organizing a theatre ensemble set a precedent for artistic excellence within tightly restricted budgetary bounds. And finally, the overall combination of his ideas and his practice gave broad direction to German theatrical activity in the Federal Republic. Audiences and performers alike recognized the

importance of theatre to a society in the process of putting itself back together; they recognized as well that theatre could indeed give focus and expression to rebuilding efforts, and that theatre could enable an entire society to confront unflinchingly its sordid past. That students of the theatre have largely failed to recognize Hilpert's contributions to the revitalization of German theatre is due perhaps to the man's personal modesty and lack of pretentiousness; it is due as well to the fact that while his vision of the theatre was expansive, it was unspectacular. During his lifetime, his ideas and methods attracted widespread, but unimposing, attention in the German press. Since his death, few inquiries into Hilpert the man or about his work have appeared in print, and he is a figure who remains in the shadows of German theatre history. As more scholars cast light on this remarkable figure, however, he will doubtless step from the shadows and take his place center stage alongside the other leaders of modern German theatre art.

NOTES

1. Willy Haas, "Die Kriegsgeneration und die Kriegsbücher," *Die literarische Welt*, 7:37 (1931), 7.
2. "Dear Heinz Hilpert!

From this unusually quiet city, to which I have repaired for a short rest, I send to you my hearty thanks for your good wishes and for your whole attitude towards me.

An old trouper recognizes the shaking of the boards under his feet and knows that life has its ups and downs. It is no wonder that most people roll with the tide. That's why I am so happy to greet a comrade who remains firm in the face of the storm and does not fear it, but takes control of it.

With sincere affection,

Yours,

Max Reinhardt"

Kurt Seeger, "Im Deutschen Theater," in *Festschrift für Heinz Hilpert*, ed. Joachim Brinkmann (Göttingen, 1960), p. 54. This, and all subsequent translations, are my own.

3. "In the art of establishing the creative profile of a play, and in assisting the natural power of acting talent to expression, Otto Brahm remains my ideal and mentor." Heinz Hilpert, *Liebe zum Theater* (Stuttgart, 1963), p. 17.
4. "I would like to function in a theatre where the picture is more important than the picture frame, where the writer is more important than the manipulation of the audience, and where the fully matured actor is more important than the prosthetic performer." Heinz Hilpert, *Gedanken zum Theater* (Göttingen, 1951), p. 7.
5. "A theatre which is not first of all a 'house of humanity' is not a theatre. The unforgettable evenings of theatre are those in which people mutually share laughter, mutually share the pleasure of delight, or fear or hope. That is only possible when the playwright, actor, and director present the essential questions of life, which everybody in the audience can grasp." Heinz Hilpert,

- “Liebeserklärung an die Bretter,” *Allgemeine Zeitung* (Mainz), 31 August 1966.
6. “The religious theatre effects, at its best, a unity of experience for everyone throughout the audience, so that a sense of shared partaking is evoked.” Hilpert, *Gedanken*, p. 21.
 7. “giving the individual a glimpse of the undiscovered country within himself.” Heinz Hilpert, “Die ‘Positivisten,’” *Bremer Nachrichten*, 23 August 1961.
 8. Hilpert, “Die ‘Positivisten,’”.
 9. “. . . in part created by the playwright, then given shape by the actor, finally illuminated and elucidated by the director...that which becomes visible through the shadow-play of consciousness and the deeper reality of the material world — the relationship of sense to the essence of life, to God — ultimately to the primal creative force.” Hilpert, *Gedanken*, p. 22.
 10. “The best director leads his actors to where they modestly serve the work and the word. . . . He brings the audience to see the work as the playwright intended, not according to arbitrary interpretation.” Hilpert, *Gedanken*, p. 27.
 11. “Directors who cause you to forget about the play but remember their own work as sensational, are killing the theatre.” Hilpert, *Gedanken*, p. 75.
 12. Hilpert, *Gedanken*, p. 51.
 13. “There dare not be an hour in our lives which is not confessional. Nor is there any sense in hatred for what was.... We must use this difficult but uplifting work for inner growth. We’ve neglected that for too long.” Hilpert, *Gedanken*, p. 63.
 14. The Deutsches Theater, at 12-13a Schumannstrasse in Berlin, was one of several theatres owned and operated by Max and Eduard Reinhardt until 1933, when the brothers were forced to liquidate their Berlin properties. The State of Prussia then took over the Deutsches Theater and provided it with an operating subsidy.
 15. *Deutsches Bühnen-Jahrbuch* (Hamburg, 1983), p. 705.
 16. Personal interview with Christine Kayssler, 15 November 1979.