

THEATRE AND WAR 1933–1945

To my father, for his support, generosity and love over the years

THEATRE AND WAR 1933–1945

PERFORMANCE IN EXTREMIS

EDITED BY MICHAEL BALFOUR



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Joseph Macleod wrote extensively about Russian Theatre. His books included *New Soviet Theatre* (Allen and Unwin, 1943) and *Actors Across the Volga* (Allen and Unwin, 1946). He also published novels. 'Brigades at the Front' originally appeared in *Actors Across the Volga*.

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Alexander Solzhenitsyn is one of Russia's most influential writers. He was born at Rostoy-on-Don in 1918, the son of an office worker and a schoolteacher. During the Second World War he served continuously at the front as a gunner and artillery officer, was twice decorated, and reached the rank of captain. In early 1945 he was arrested and charged with making derogatory remarks about Stalin. For the next eight years he was in labour camps. When his book *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* was published in 1953, on Stalin's death, Solzhenitsyn had to remain in exile for three years, although his wife was allowed to join him. After the publication in Europe of his book *The Gulag Archipelago*, he was arrested by the authorities and deported. His other works include *The First Circle*, *The Love-girl and the Innocent* and *Cancer Ward*. In 1970 Solzhenitsyn was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. 'The Muses in Gulag' was first published in *The Gulag Archipelago*.

Bruce Zortman's interest in German Theatre dates from his years as a Taussig Fellow at the Free University of Berlin. The author interrupted his own study to collaborate with Charles Laughton on the anthology *The Fabulous Country*. Other work includes *In a Land that is not yours*, a play about a young victim of Holocaust filmed for television by Warner Communications, and a suspense novel *The Fifth Criterion* (FB, 1980). The essay was first published in *Hitler's Theatre – Ideological Drama in Nazi Germany* (Firestein Books, 1984)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book came about by accident. It was a result of the inevitable post-traumatic period after finishing my doctorate and finding that I did not have a reason to be lurking in the library, skulking in bookshops and scouring second hand book-sellers for specialist publications. In other words I had to find a new excuse for my bookish habits, and to my surprise and delight I did.

I owe debts and gratitude, both personal and professional, to many people over the year it took me to select and edit these essays. I need to thank all the contributors who not only allowed me to put this collection together, but who offered support, advice and encouragement along the way. I owe much to Günter Berghaus – who has done a great deal of important work in this area already – and who was incredibly generous and supportive of this project. Thanks also to Baz Kershaw, for stimulating and challenging me over the years, and to Marion Berghahn for all her electronic encouragement via e-mail. This book could not have been completed without my wife's unceasing support – and her tactful late night yawns as I blabbed on about the intricacies of Russian footnotes. To her I owe everything.

INTRODUCTION

All art brings a message into the world, but it is not the message of morality or of philosophy, nor of discourse and law-giving. It is the message of life, of life itself . . . And where there is no reverence, or respect, for the creative impulse of art there can be no civilised society. Civilisation exists only where conscience exists.¹

The theme of this book is the many different forms theatre took during the extreme political and social turmoil of the Second World War. It is my hope that underlying the accounts is a contemporary relevance to exploring the radical potential of theatre, and of exploring forms of resistance against dominant structures of authority and power in ways that are not just negatively against a regime but positively for some human value or ideal that lies well beyond ideological territory.

The essays in this collection demonstrate that in the midst of mass killing, starvation, degradation, disease and continual fear, the theatre flourished. They have been selected and edited from a wide range of publications dating from the 1940s to the 1990s. The authors are academics, cultural historians, and theatre practitioners – some with direct experience of the harsh conditions of Europe during the war. Each author critically assesses the function of theatre in a time of crisis, exploring themes of Fascist aesthetic propaganda in Italy and Germany, of theatre re-education programmes in the Gulags of Russia, of cultural ‘sustenance’ for the troops at the front and interned German refugees in the UK, or simply cabaret as a currency for survival in Jewish concentration camps.

Attempting to understand theatre practices during the chaos and decimation wrought by the war is somewhat of a problem. The problem is not just our inability to understand the historical context in experiential terms, not just the helplessness of the mind before a destructiveness beyond imagining, but it is that no historical,

philosophical or metaphysical explanation can possibly cope with the complex questions it raises about human nature.

If we take, for example, the context of the Jewish concentration camps it is hard to imagine how conditions could have been less conducive to performance. The physical dimensions in the camps included constant torture, mass executions, labour so exhausting that the worker was expected to live for only a matter of months, and rations so meagre that, even after the camps were liberated, victims by the thousands died from irreversible malnutrition. One would expect such an atmosphere to lead to complete disintegration of all will to survive. Nazi's instituted policies aimed at severing the connection between one's self and one's surrounding.

The prisoners mind, the moral and philosophical decisions that had formed identity, were no longer of use. All they could rely on was the animal need to survive. In short, the Nazis aimed to create a victim who was nothing more than a beast. All human value was extirpated. Only the power to work, the fear of pain, the ability to obey, and the will to live survived.²

Testimonies from survivors of the Jewish ghettos also suggest that there was too much fear, too much suffering for there to be even a consideration of cultural life. The houses were hideously overcrowded, with an average of nine to a room in Warsaw.³ Disease was rampant, food and money were very scarce; education, and very often reading were forbidden. There were arbitrary killings by the Germans, and regular deportations to the labour and concentration camps. The streets would be full of beggars, orphans and often corpses. Ben Helfgott, a survivor from the Polish ghetto of Piotrkow and Buchenwald concentration camp, provides testimony of the conditions.

Your energy went into surviving and it was so much a matter of luck. A sadistic SS officer might see you on the street. And they had dogs trained to go for a man's testicles. And then there were the knocks on the door in the night when they rounded up people for deportation.⁴

Under normal peaceful conditions, the artist's struggle begins when he/she is faced with the task of transforming his/her ideas and writing through rehearsal into performance. A wartime theatre artist's problems (whether in a ghetto or camp) started at the very beginning of the artistic process with the acquisition of writing materials, lack of space for rehearsal and performance, the difficulty of persuading an audience to come to an illegal event, and the ever-present threat that if caught they would be deported, arrested or even killed.

In an environment established for the purpose of destruction rather than creation, artists needed great ingenuity to plan, rehearse and perform. The theatre that was finally created was affected by all these circumstances. In his published diaries of those years, the actor Jonas Turkow reveals what lengths performers and audiences had to go to in order to mount a production.

The theatre was located in an attic, where a stage and curtain were set up . . . In order to reach the house you had to pass many courtyards and mountains of ruins. In various spots pickets were posted who had the double task of showing theatre-goers the way and of watching to see that an unwanted guest – a German – did not sneak in. If one did, each picket passed a code word to the next and then the audience, together with the artists, left through a side door and hid amid the ruins.⁵

Given the risks, why did artists and audiences risk their lives for these performances? It would be easy to give facile answers – the artists' need to create, the unquenchable human spirit. But we must remember the difficulty these theatre performers had in putting on a show. The most innocuous works were illegal. If discovered by an SS officer they could be sentenced to death. Perhaps foremost, we must recall the abuses to which these people were subjected; they do not fall within the range of any normal human experience. No matter how strong an artist's urge to create had been before the war, the absolute brutality of ghetto or camp life might naturally have dimmed it. The performance must have had extraordinary value for their creators, or they would not have been created. Helfgott

To have art was another way of fighting the Germans. The arts were illegal and so it was a form of defiance. If the SS had found out the organisers would have been sent away or a few people shot. I remember that performances were usually full. There were never any announcements or posters. The news just spread by word of mouth. We were starved of any kind of culture, learning or studies, and it took your mind away from the turmoil.⁶

The whole question of civic resistance, the use of theatre as defiance, is very important. The cultural manifestations were an attempt to affirm human values, to deny dehumanisation. Jacob Gens, a leader of the Vilna Jewish Council, wrote in his diary nine months before he was arrested and shot by the Gestapo, 'We wanted to give people the opportunity to free themselves from the ghetto for several hours, and this we achieved. Our bodies are in the ghetto, but our spirit has not been enslaved'.⁷

One of the tangible reasons for performance in these extreme circumstances, and a theme which emerges from a number of chapters

in this book, is that artists, in creating performances, experienced an element of control in their work. They alone were responsible for the form and style of their creations, their focus and occasionally their subject matter; they made decisions for themselves. Whether the decisions were motivated by a sense of history, a sense of aesthetics, or both, through their performances they were able to create a dramatic space in which they commanded power denied them in reality. A sense of dignity and self-worth was thereby momentarily preserved. Furthermore, the process of creating helped the theatre-makers evade the painful reality of prison camp life and establish an illusion of normality, at least while they were engrossed in their work. Then they could think of something normal, something that did not hurt. This need to divorce themselves from the gruesome aspects of 'a world gone mad' may also explain the 'neutral' themes of the productions – in which we see camp events chronicled, but minus the horrifying aspects with which the camps were fraught.

However the war-time performances also highlighted another issue – which will be critically addressed in this book – of theatre as a politically and socially malleable medium for cultural expression, as conducive to supporting the structures and ideologies of power as to challenging and overthrowing them. Any potential of theatre to produce resistances and hope against oppressive power structures has to be balanced with its inverse ability to be exploited by dominant ideologies for the (perceived) benefit and deception of the public.

The relationship between theatre and art to propaganda is not at all straightforward. George Orwell's statement that 'all art is to some extent propaganda'⁸ was probably closer to the truth than Hitler, who on one occasion was heard echoing the popular view that 'art has nothing to do with propaganda'.⁹ Not the least of the ironies contained in these seemingly contradictory statements is the fact that Hitler's remarks were addressed to Josef Goebbels who, as head of the Reich Ministry for Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda, had attempted to create a state apparatus for thought control which could have served as a model for the perfect totalitarian state depicted in Orwell's novel *Nineteen- Eighty-Four*.

Goebbels's Ministry moreover, despite Hitler's apparent claim for art's privileged status, concerned itself intensively and in intricate detail with the production and dissemination of cultural works. The more spectacular moments of this activity, especially the scenes of students publicly burning the works of Heine, Thomas Mann, Brecht etc., were recorded on newsreel and are now housed in film and TV archives around the world. That they are periodically slipped into various documentaries dealing with the Third Reich has

no doubt contributed to the widespread belief that Nazi Germany is to be identified with the very essence of twentieth-century propaganda, and that by witnessing and condemning such scenes we will somehow strengthen our resistance to propagandistic messages which may be aimed directly at us by sinister forces within our own society.

Propaganda does not often come marching towards us waving swastikas and chanting 'Sieg Heil'. In reality, propaganda is much more subtle. It conceals itself in an attempt to coalesce completely and invisibly with the values and accepted power symbols of a given society. When Hitler claimed that art had nothing to do with propaganda he was anticipating a perfectly integrated National Socialist Germany whose art would spontaneously and unthinkingly reproduce the desired images and perceptions.

Several of the writers in this collection are careful to distinguish their readings of fascist culture from the tendencies of early post-war histories of the Third Reich: the first presents Fascism as simply opposed to culture, whether traditional or modernist, the second as merely instrumental in relation to it. These tendencies have not been helped by Göring's alleged statements on art: 'Every time I hear the word culture I reach for my gun . . .'. In reality the Fascists embarked on an ambitious schedule of opera and the building of huge outdoor 'art' stadiums to house mass spectacles in Germany and Italy. The Fascists' desire to reinvent the arts in the name of their ideology represents, perhaps, one of the most ambitious periods of State subsidy in Western Europe this century. These performances were not intended to be crude, didactic and overt propaganda pieces, indeed Goebbels was contemptuous of such exercises, like Alfred Rosenberg's *Myth of the Twentieth Century*, which he described as an 'ideological belch'.¹⁰ Shortly after the Nazis assumed power he explained that there were two ways of making a revolution: 'You can go on shooting up the opposition with machine-guns until they acknowledge the superiority of the gunners. That is the simple way. But you can also transform the nation by mental revolution and thus win over the opposition instead of annihilating them. We National Socialists have adopted the second way and intend to pursue it'.¹¹ Goebbels continued:

So I must simplify reality, omitting here, adding there. It is the same with an artist, whose picture can diverge a long way from the objective truth. What matters is that my political perception should, like the artist's aesthetic one, be genuine and true, that is to say beneficial to society. Detail doesn't matter. Truth consists in what benefits my country.¹²

But these statements need to be regarded as both contentious and contradictory. Despite these notions of an invisible ‘mental revolution’, many of the Nazi’s experiments in mass theatre performances *were* actually crude and didactic if not downright artistic failures. As several of the writers in this book observe, the performances were jingoistic pieces, none of which particularly impressed. Solzhenitsyn’s essay on the re-education camps in Russia makes the point about propaganda very clear, ‘if anybody should ever try to tell you with shining eyes that someone was re-educated by government means through the KVCh – the Cultural and Educational Section – you can reply with total conviction: Nonsense!’¹³ At the same time in Occupied France, and perhaps even amongst the operatic artists in Germany, the constraints of having to produce overtly pro-fascist pieces were circumvented by practitioners determined to produce plays under close scrutiny and censorship. Nor should it be forgotten that propaganda in the form of ‘light-hearted’ shows designed to boost the morale of the troops at the Front, or of civilians sheltering from an air raid, can serve a useful function. The point about all these examples is that the extreme societal conflict of the Second World War highlights the complexity of theatre and its relationship to authority and power; its ability to resist and transcend, as well as to be incorporated into the ideological machinery, in a way that is both revealing and significant for contemporary culture.

The book has been divided into four sections: *The Aesthetics of Fascism; Theatre, Occupation and Curfew; Theatre Behind Barbed Wire*; and *Theatre at the Front*.

The Aesthetics of Fascism begins with Jeffrey Schnapp’s detailed reconstruction of the 18 BL spectacle, a performance that was a direct response to Mussolini’s call for ‘a distinctive fascist theatre for twenty thousand spectators’. The spectacle was set outside Florence on a site the size of six football fields and its cast included an air squadron, an infantry, a cavalry brigade, fifty trucks, four field and machine gun batteries, ten field radio stations, six photoelectric units, and over two thousand amateur actors performing before an audience of twenty thousand. Named after the first truck to be mass-produced by Fiat, 18 BL was ‘conceived as a dramatic crucible. . . in technique and effect somewhere between a theatre of war and a film production of epic proportions . . .’¹⁴. Schnapp’s article is a fascinating cultural reconstruction of this forgotten event and serves as a springboard for three other essays which develop the inquiry into the place of the arts in the Fascist imagination. Pietro Cavallo contextualises the wider cultural concerns of the Mussolini regime, offering insights into Fascist models of narrative, historiography and

the spectacle; while Erik Levi explodes the myth that culture under the Third Reich suffered. In particular he points to the commissioning of an astonishing 170 new operas between 1933–44 as testimony to the Nazi's creative energies. Levi's revealing essay discusses the Nazi's search for what Goebbels described as an art that has a 'romanticism of steel' and deconstructs the National Socialists aesthetic to glean clues of ideological relevance and hints of subversive undercurrents, arguing that some of the most significant challenges to Nazi cultural authority occurred in the Opera Houses of the post-Weimar period. In Bruce Zortman's essay, 'Hitler's Theatre', the author documents the 'destruction that is wrought by the imposition of totalitarian precepts on the theatre'.¹⁵ He argues that an energetically subsidised theatre does not necessarily produce a creative one, and that the artistic quality of a theatrical production declines in direct proportion to its mass appeal specifically when it is designed to further political or ideological ambitions.

The *Theatre, Occupation and Curfew* section contains two essays. The first details the remarkable transformation of British theatre during the war years. Andrew Davis's essay remarks on a war-time trend which for the first time since the nineteenth century diminished the dominance of London West End stage productions. An amusing and representative anecdote from this essay is of a melodramatic actress responding to the forced re-location of a West End theatre company to 'the provinces' with a shocked: 'Burnley. Where's Burnley?'. Not only were theatre companies forced to vacate their London buildings but performances were created in makeshift 'non-theatrical' locations: evacuation centres, war hostels, factory canteens, army camps, gun sites and even tube stations (with the occasional trains roaring through) – and in front of audiences the majority of whom had never been inside a theatre. The second essay documents the French theatre during the German Occupation and reveals a surprising fact that attendance's rose dramatically during the period (1940–44). Audiences were undeterred by the difficulties of getting to and from the theatre under black-out conditions, by the ban on heating or by the constant interruptions caused by air-raid sirens. Gabriel Jacobs's essay argues that the French theatre was able, at times, to subtly survive the extensive censorship. This was despite the large crew of German Propaganda-staff who attempted to sway French public opinion towards 'collaboration' in the Nazi New Order; and the subtle use of a cultural structure with which the French were already familiar, rather than the superimposed German production of books, films, theatre etc. The one character that could be relied upon to please everybody was Joan of Arc. She pleased the Germans because, in her life and

by her death, she showed up both the frailty and the perfidy of Albion. She pleased the French because she could be presented as the symbol of a humiliated France fighting to regain her stained honour and self-respect.

In 1940 25,000 German and Austrian refugees who had fled Hitler's Germany were detained for indefinite internment in the U.K. The majority were Jews, leftists, liberals, anti-fascists, intellectuals and artists who had sought refuge in Britain, only to be arrested and sent to camps with cramped and basic conditions. Several committed suicide, either out of desperation, or from fear that they would suffer similar atrocities encountered in German camps. In one English camp there were three Nobel prize-winners, twenty Oxford professors, a dozen scientists and many world-renowned actors, musicians and artists. In order to fight the sense of abandonment and dislocation the internees formed cultural and education groups, which included topical revues, original plays dealing with prison life, and performances of works by Aristotle and Thomas Mann. *Theatre Behind Barbed Wire* contains five fascinating stories dealing with theatre in the most unexpected of situations – the wartime prison. Two essays recount the experiences of German refugees in British internment; Alan Clarke's essay documents the story, while George Brandt provides a personal testimony illustrating the tale with insightful knowledge. *Theatre Behind Barbed Wire* also deals with the more sinister application of the arts in prisons, with extracts from Alexander Solzhenitsyn's memoirs of the Gulag Archipelago in Soviet Russia. The section concludes with the unique story of cabaret in the concentration camps of Westerbork, Dachau and Theresienstadt. Peter Jelavich's unsettling account of elaborate shows put on with the encouragement and active support of the SS commandants. Some of those who performed for the German officers were granted the privilege of living in private cottages and the promise of exemption from deportation. In other words becoming a member of the cast was a life-or-death matter. Many prisoners boycotted the revues because they considered them tasteless at best, and sacrilegious at worst. This is not surprising when one learns that the wood for the stage at Westerbork had been taken from the demolished synagogue of a nearby town. However for some inmates the performances were a 'valuable component of inner resistance' to the extent that inmates believed the shows provided not only short-term diversion but also gave them the mental strength to carry on. Moreover, some revues tried to achieve concrete, practical goals. Certain scenes probably attempted to be conduits between the inmates and the camp commandants, by appealing for good treatment. Performers were even

able to express defiance, and evoked the brutal conditions – the barbed wire, the armed guards, the cynicism of the promises while offering a vision of eventual freedom. While the cabaret offered hope, it was for many a short-term hope, as the shows did not alter the fate of most inmates. This powerful essay documents the context of cabaret's 'light music and performance beside an open grave' arguing that the genre was strained to the limits in the concentration camps, and it was there that cabaret died.

The last essay in the book charts the remarkable achievements of Russian theatre 'brigades' taking entire classical and contemporary works to the front-lines. By February 1945 no fewer than 800,000 performances had been given by 900 brigades composed of 15,000 artists, including companies which entertained the guerrillas *behind enemy lines*. The stages were lorry platforms, warship decks, forest clearings; and the scenery was tents and sheets. There was hardly a first-class theatre in the Soviet Union which did not organise a theatre brigade. Nor was this considered a mere act of 'cheering up the boys'. High profile Moscow directors prepared brigade programmes in the same way they prepared first nights '... and were bound to show the front line real high art'; *Anna Karenina* and *The Three Sisters* were performed to an audience of anti-aircraft gunners in a dug-out trench. The touring brigades, dressed in camouflage capes, often under fire, toured the front-lines in any manner they could, on foot, on horseback, hitch-hiking or boarding munitions trains, and performed at night sometimes within 500 yards of the enemy. Joseph Macleod's essay was written shortly after the war, and describes the bravery and ingenuity of theatre artists, circus performers, opera stars and puppeteers who endured and shared the conditions of the front-line with their countrymen – on an astonishing scale never before witnessed in any other war.

I have deliberately included essays with a range of styles and varying levels of analysis, reflection and documentation. Some essays are meticulously researched academic pieces, others are personal insights into wartime experiences; some were written shortly after the war, others were written a few years ago. The reason for this is that theatre history, or any kind of history, is dependent on diverse interpretations and readings. The intention was to present a selection of work which not only analysed theatre practice during the war, but humanised and personalised it. I hope this makes this collection a richer sourcebook, one that deepens understanding as well as knowledge of this unique period. History will always demonstrate a variety of interpretations of the past, and a tolerance of this diversity, whether temporal or cultural, personal or analytical, is the absolute base of any considered exploration of the past.

Notes

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