

ROUTLEDGE REVIVALS

# **The Revolution in German Theatre 1900-1933**

**Michael Patterson**



## The Revolution in German Theatre 1900-1933

First published in 1981, this book represents the first work in English to give a comprehensive account of the revolutionary developments in German theatre from the decline of Naturalism through the Expressionist upheaval to the political theatre of Piscator and Brecht. Early productions of Kaiser's *From Morning till Midnight* and Toller's *Transfiguration* are presented as examples of Expressionism. A thorough analysis of Piscator's *Hoppla, Such is Life!* and Brecht's *Man* show the similarities and differences in political theatre. In addition, elements of stage-craft are examined — illustrated with tabulated information, an extensive chronology, and photographs and designs of productions.

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To my mother

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All translations, unless otherwise indicated, are my own, although I have used the standard English translation of play-titles even where I regard these as inelegant or inaccurate.



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# Introduction

A good play can only in part be committed to paper.

Goethe: *Preface to Theory of Colour*

When in Max Reinhardt's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in 1905 the lights went up on a slowly revolving woodland scene, the audience witnessed more than the revolutions of a stage set; they were seeing the beginnings of a revolution in theatre itself.

That this revolution should occur in Germany is in part explained by the lack of any strong national dramatic tradition in that country. In the seventeenth century there had been the religious drama of the Baroque period, much of which was originally composed in Latin, and in the early eighteenth century the misguided attempts of Gottsched and his followers to transplant French theatre onto German soil. But it was not until the latter half of the eighteenth century that a theatre that was both native and literary became established in Germany, two centuries later than England's Elizabethan flowering and over a century after France's classical renaissance.

When German drama did finally emerge with Lessing, Goethe, Schiller and Kleist, it created the best poetry in the theatre since Racine and, in works like *Faust*, introduced to the stage a depth of philosophical thought of a kind unparalleled in modern times. What it did not do was discover a new theatrical style. Having rejected the severe and inappropriate constraints of French neo-classicism, the young German theatre willingly embraced its new mentor, Shakespeare – with abandon as in the case of the young Goethe and Storm and Stress playwrights or with more restraint in the older Goethe, Schiller and Kleist. Indeed, the achievement of these later playwrights was to have discovered a synthesis between Shakespeare's historic breadth and the formal discipline of the neo-classical style; but this was a drawing together of former styles rather than the basis for renewal.

With the exception of Büchner, who was to remain unperformed for some seventy years, there were hardly any stylistic developments in nineteenth-century German theatre, its greatest exponents, Grillparzer and Hebbel,

continuing to write predominantly historical and mythical five-act tragedies in blank verse (Hebbel's one contemporary social drama in prose, *Maria Magdalene*, looked back to Lessing's bourgeois tragedies rather than forward to anything new).

Renewal finally came from Scandinavia and Russia. Germany, like France and England, drew inspiration from the new realistic theatre, but Germany's leading Naturalist, Gerhart Hauptmann, was a minor talent compared with Ibsen, Chekhov or Shaw.

Then, in the first third of this century, Germany's lack of a strong national dramatic tradition at last stood it in good stead. For it was here, as in Russia, amidst the social, political and cultural turmoil of those years of peace and war and revolution, of disintegrating monarchy and teetering republic and incipient dictatorship, that the theatrical styles that dislodged realism were born. In this plethora of experimentation in the German theatre one can discover, if not the absolute origins, at least a major stage in the development of all the following theatre styles: abstract theatre, the Theatre of Cruelty, absurdist theatre, happenings, satirical cabarets, agitprop theatre, documentary theatre and environmental stagings.

For the first time, Germany had a major contribution to make in terms of theatre style. Whereas the period of German classicism (Goethe and Schiller) excelled in its poetry and thought but had little to offer in terms of staging, the new German theatre hardly distinguished itself in either its writing or its content. The intoxication with language of the Expressionists and the prosaic idiom of the early socialist theatre did not make for great poetry; the ecstatic utterances of the former and the trite exhortations of the latter could hardly be regarded as philosophical thought. Only Brecht, still a long way off the achievements of his later works, showed a capacity for either.

The inadequacies of the written texts help to explain the prevailing ignorance about German theatre of this period. Enid Starkie, writing in 1960 about the influence of France on English literature, asserted that 'the most advanced and stimulating theatre in Europe'<sup>1</sup> between the wars was to be found in Paris.

This ignorance of the achievements of the German theatre of the period is commonplace and easily explained. When the curtain falls after a theatre performance, the text of the play is the only substantial record that remains. For the rest, the style of the performance has to be deduced from various fragments of information, each of which suffers from certain inadequacies:

- 1 *The playwright's stage-directions*: While these are a good guide to the intentions of the author with regard to the staging of his play, they do not necessarily coincide with the actual execution of the piece. Moreover, a writer may himself be hardly conversant with the theatre practice of the day and so may entrust the realization of his text to the director and designer.

- 2 *Manifestos and theoretical writings by writers and theatre practitioners*: While these again reveal demands and intentions about the theatre, and are obviously of particular importance in the case of Brecht, they do not necessarily reflect what was actually achieved on stage.
- 3 *Prompt-books*: These are a valuable source of information regarding the staging of a play, although here moves, light-changes, etc. are usually recorded without any analysis of the reasons why they were done in this way. Regrettably, too, no prompt-books of any major Expressionist productions are extant. The only important source of this kind I have discovered for this period is Piscator's detailed prompt-book for Toller's *Hoppla, wir leben!*, lodged in the Piscator Archive in Berlin.
- 4 *Set and costume designs*: Once more these express well the intention of the designer, but it is clear that the theatrical realization often resulted in a compromise due to the lack of resources and conservatism of the theatre management. A comparison between designs and photographs of the same production will frequently bear this out.
- 5 *Photographs*: While these should supposedly offer an authentic record of the visual quality of the staging, their value is severely restricted by the technical limitations of the photography of the period, not least in that they could not record colour. Until 1926 it was not possible to photograph during a performance: all pictures were taken with the actors posed under full lighting (one of the special exhibits at the Magdeburg Theatre Exhibition of 1927 was 'Photographs taken during performance' with the new Ermanox camera).<sup>2</sup> Under these conditions it is not surprising that photographs were taken of scenes that did not even exist in the play: an example is Plate 20, where three actors are shown who never appear together in the action.
- 6 *Sketches made during performance*: Although a rapid and subjective impression by one artist, these provide probably the most reliable record of the visual impact of a production. Compared with Strohbach's impressionistic design for a scene in Toller's *Masse Mensch* (Plate 24) and the banal photograph of the same scene (Plate 25), Robert Edmond Jones's excellent sketch (Plate 26) would seem to capture best the quality of the original.
- 7 *Programmes*: While recording the names of the performers and resolving questions about the doubling of roles, these are usually of little value.
- 8 *Contemporary reviews*: These are obviously a major source of information. They suffer, however, from the journalistic pressure of providing a response to a new theatrical event: the work itself will usually be discussed in some detail, the reaction of the audience will be

recorded, and usually little space remains for any analysis of the theatrical style of the performance. Moreover, the contemporary reviewer may lack perspective: a set design may appear startlingly innovative when in fact, in the light of later developments, it may be more properly regarded as a minor modification to an existing style.

- 9 *Critical works*: Here the critic possesses the perspective lacked by the journalistic reviewer, and works like Felix Emmel's *Das ekstatische Theater* (1924) and Bernhard Diebold's *Anarchie im Drama* (1921) provide invaluable insights into the theatre of the period. However, the tendency in critical works is to remain on the sure ground of textual criticism, and theatrical style is therefore seldom discussed.
- 10 *Personal reminiscences*: Occasionally these will also provide useful records of early productions, but all too often the analytical is replaced by the anecdotal.
- 11 *Films*: There are no extant recordings on film of any stage productions of this period, but the cinematic treatment of a play text, as in Karl Heinz Martin's 1920 film of Kaiser's *Von morgens bis mitternachts* or G. W. Pabst's 1931 film version of Brecht's *Die Dreigroschenoper* may at least give an impression of the acting style of the period.

In addition to the fragmentary and inconclusive nature of these sources there are further reasons why the theatre practice of this period in Germany is so neglected. The names of the major theatre innovators of the twentieth century that spring to mind, Stanislavsky, Appia, Craig, Meyerhold, Piscator, Brecht, Artaud, Grotowski, Brook, are significantly those who have set down their ideas about theatre on paper and have left a substantial body of writing to posterity. But, uncharacteristically for the Germans, until Piscator and Brecht, most of this brilliant generation of directors, designers and actors were too involved in the process of experimentation to step back and theorize about their work. After a lifetime in the theatre Max Reinhardt left behind little more than an unfinished, unpublished autobiography and some interviews and prompt-books, and Leopold Jessner's scattered comments on the theatre would hardly fill a thin pamphlet.

Another reason is that the caesura of Nazi barbarism halted the normal spread of influence and ideas from the German theatre. By the time the Nazi regime had collapsed, the exciting theatrical developments of the first third of this century had passed into history.

Finally, there is the problem of language. While there was strong cross-fertilization between England and France, the hitherto supreme theatre nations of Europe, the German language erected a barrier around German theatre. Schönberg in music, and the artists of *Der blaue Reiter* and *Die Brücke* and later of the Bauhaus, could easily exert an international influence. But with rare exceptions, like Auden and Isherwood, the English, and to a

lesser degree the French, remained unaware of the revolution taking place in the German theatre.

Nevertheless, something filtered through. O'Neill in America (*The Great God Brown*) and O'Casey in Ireland (*The Silver Tassie*) began to find the Expressionist path out of debilitating realism; and if T. S. Eliot had developed his Expressionistic style seen in *Sweeney Agonistes*, and James Joyce had exploited the theatrical possibilities of the Night-Town sequence in *Ulysses*, they might have discovered a more vital form of theatre than that represented in *The Cocktail Party* or *Exiles*.

This present study is an attempt to rescue the German theatre of the first third of this century from its undeserved neglect. It has long been acknowledged that the strength of this theatre lay in its bold stylistic experimentation rather than in its writing. In his book on German Expressionist drama, J. M. Ritchie re-asserts Hans Schwerte's view that 'Expressionist drama was at its best when at its most theatrical and at its least literary',<sup>3</sup> and yet no attempt, in German or English, has hitherto been made to provide a comprehensive account of its theatrical strengths.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, the Expressionist revolution in the theatre was not only of significance in itself, it was the prerequisite for the political theatre that was to supersede it. And while excellent accounts of Piscator's and Brecht's theatre have appeared in English, notably by Christopher Innes and John Willett, it is important to see the political theatre of the 1920s in the context of the Expressionist legacy. This book will attempt to show where the theatrical strengths of Expressionism lay and how Piscator and Brecht transformed them to their own ends.

### **Note on Tables 2-5 (pp. 50, 56, 116, 154)**

In order to provide a point of reference for the more discursive arguments in the body of the text, I have included four tables which juxtapose different types of theatre: Naturalism/Expressionism; Abstractionism/Primitivism; Expressionist theatre/Political theatre of the 1920s; Piscator's theatre/Brecht's theatre. Such tables, while being in the best tradition of German dialectics, in their very simplicity have a tendency to over-simplify. The reader is asked to treat them merely as a clear, and, one hopes, stimulating complement to the more specific ideas discussed in the text.

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## Part One

# **The Expressionist revolution in the German theatre**

The uniformity and stupidity of mankind are so outrageous that only through outrages can they be dealt with. Let the new drama be outrageous.

Ivan Goll: 'The super-drama'



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# I • Origins of the revolution

## Political and social background

With the help of your Emperor and of Richard Wagner you have made of the 'German virtues' an operatic display which no one in the world took seriously but yourselves. And behind this pretty humbug of operatic splendour you allowed your dark instincts, your servility and your swagger to proliferate.

Hermann Hesse (1919)

One evening in the spring of 1914 a young writer 'with lean face and burning eyes'<sup>1</sup> rose to his feet in Kurt Hiller's literary cabaret *Das Gnu* to give a reading of his first play, *Der Sohn* (*The Son*). Listening to this remarkable new piece by the twenty-three-year-old Walter Hasenclever, the audience could hardly have imagined that the revolution it foretold would be achieved within five years. The play describes the grotesque situation of a twenty-year-old youth who is kept prisoner by his whip-wielding father for failing to pass his school examinations. Eventually the Son rebels, and pulls a revolver on his father. The father drops dead from a heart-attack, and the Son steps over his father's corpse into freedom.

Like the Son, Hasenclever's generation felt itself imprisoned by the bourgeois society of Wilhelminian Germany; and four and a half years later the Father of the German People, Kaiser Wilhelm II, abdicated and fled into exile without a shot being fired at him. It was, to say the least, an unpredictable development. In the spring of 1914 the German Empire seemed to be built on rock-firm foundations. The Second Empire had been in existence for over forty years, still proud of the glorious victory over the French which had brought it into being. The nationalists' dream of creating a united German nation (admittedly with the exclusion of Austria) had at last been realized, and the Reich now commanded almost universal allegiance. True, the liberal middle classes were critical of the authoritarian structure of the state, the socialists objected to its exploitative capitalism, and the Catholic

Church was still nursing its wounds from Bismarck's 'Kulturkampf'. But the basis of the Imperial State remained virtually unchallenged. Even the Social Democratic Party (SPD), which was theoretically committed to the revolutionary ideology of Marx, had in practice become distinctly revisionist, allowing a gradualist policy of reform to weaken the will of the proletariat, a development later to be evidenced by the Party's wholehearted support for the war. Thus the German bourgeois could sleep sound in his bed at night, secure in the knowledge that his Emperor was loved and respected and that, if the call came, even the grumbling workers would rise up in his defence.

Germany's standing in the world seemed also assured. A century earlier it had been a jigsaw of 360 states and principalities, each with its own currency, its own system of weights and measures, and its own laws. Now in 1914 united Germany was a world power with its own colonies and a colossal navy second only to Britain's. In sixty-five years the population had doubled: from 35 million in 1849 to 70 million in 1914. In response to rapid industrialization most of this increase had been in the cities, whose population had risen from 10 million to 40 million, with the capital Berlin expanding from 400,000 to 2 million inhabitants.

The extraordinary growth in the industrial sector had increased the productive capacity of Germany eightfold in the first forty years of the Empire. By comparison, Britain's capacity had merely doubled during the same period and France's had trebled. Only the USA could boast a faster growth-rate. Germany's steel industry was the most powerful in Europe, and its chemical and electrical industries dominated the world markets; for example, 85 per cent of the world's requirements of synthetic dyes were supplied by German concerns.

Not only was this industrialization extremely rapid, but it was also highly centralized. The much more leisurely expansion of the British economy had produced 50,000 joint-stock companies by 1910, whereas German capital was concentrated in just 5,000. Within a single generation the Germans had seen the medieval one-man workshops and travelling journeymen eclipsed by huge concerns like Krupp's of Essen (70,000 employees) and AEG of Berlin (30,000 employees). To sustain their power, the industrial magnates formed 'cartels' or price-fixing agreements within an industry, often by cynical recourse to an appeal to 'Gemeinschaft' (community) instead of 'Gesellschaft' (society), or, to put it more bluntly, to co-operative capitalism in place of competitive capitalism.

Assured of internal security and ever-increasing prosperity, Germany now sought the missing components in its bid to become a world power: foreign markets for its products, and influence in international affairs. It seemed unfair: a nation of such economic and cultural wealth was excluded from the great movements of history and was being treated like some parvenu shut out from an aristocratic club reserved for Britain, France and Russia. It seemed