
THEATRE

The Opulent Culture

Does the "German System" Really Work? — By SIEGFRIED MELCHINGER

I WAS REMINDED during one of those perennial discussions here about "problems of present-day German theatre," of a recent visit to London where I had gone to see *Hamlet* at Olivier's new National Theatre. What a sense of excitement one had each time one went to the theatre in London! I listened to my British friends' eager questions, their praise of our own German theatre system (certain fundamental principles of which seemed to have been taken over by the National Theatre). Then, on my return home, what inertia suddenly surrounded me—an inertia which seems to point to a chronic, if not hopeless, sickness in the German theatre.

Why is there in the London theatre this atmosphere of *excitement*? How and why does it communicate itself to audiences even on not very successful nights? And why, on the other hand, do so many of our performances seem to drag and flag, perfunctorily acclaimed by audiences who have come to expect nothing better?

These questions, I think, are not difficult to answer. Your actors in London try, as it were, to give the performance of their lives every night of the week; whereas ours, whom the *system* has turned into civil servants, don't exert themselves unduly. They have a year's contract; they have paid holidays; many of them can look forward to a pension; none can be dismissed. Of course, this oversimplifies the case for and against our theatre system. One hardly ever appreciates the things one has; one envies others for their

blessings. I think I know the advantages of the German theatre and the disadvantages of the Anglo-American theatre fairly well. But it will not, I hope, be held against an admirer of London theatre if he expresses the view that the disadvantages of the German theatre system, if adopted in England, might one day affect the London theatre too.

The most important difference between the two systems is also the obvious one: the continuous run on the one hand and the repertory programme on the other. Most German theatres run several plays in series during one season, which obliges theatres to keep together an ensemble on long-term contracts. Each actor has a part in several plays in the repertory. Leading theatres have a first night every three or four weeks. As a rule, the director is given between three and five weeks for rehearsals. Clearly, this expenditure cannot be met without subsidies. According to statistics, annual theatre subsidies from public money in medium-sized towns amount to 21s. per head. The grand total is very large indeed: total subsidies amounted to roughly £25,000,000 during the last season. The sum increases every year. Since 1945, more than a hundred theatres have been rebuilt, many costing more than £1,000,000. Our government, evidently, takes an extraordinarily keen interest in theatre. Even the peasant in a remote village makes his contribution—so that the nearest town (which he rarely, if ever, visits) can maintain a theatre with an ensemble and full repertory programme. The recovery of all costs through the box office would be possible only in cities with more than a million inhabitants. But even there, with the high cost of material and heavy social-service contributions, tickets would actually cost far more than the public is willing to pay.

A REALISTIC ASSESSMENT of our system is possible only if one takes into account the reasons for it, and considers the situation arising therefrom. The most important reason is historical: the

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system has a tradition of 250 years behind it. There are about 63 towns in the *Bundesrepublik* which maintain subsidised theatres; and this goes back to the structure of the old *Reich*, composed of greater and lesser principalities. The princely rulers prided themselves on their theatres and vied with their neighbours in the splendour of their productions. Absolutism is the historical reason why, even to-day, country towns of barely 5,000 inhabitants still have fully subsidised, functioning theatres. Groups of former itinerant players became permanent ensembles. Inevitably, theatrical life gradually lost its feudal character. As early as the beginnings of the 19th century the Prussian king had dedicated his Berlin *Hoftheater* (Court Theatre) "to the pleasure of my subjects." (Incidentally, Frederick the Great had already renounced his royal box at Potsdam and taken his seat in the fifth row of the stalls.)

With the growth of towns and the expansion of capitalism, the middle classes infiltrated into the *Hoftheater*. To-day, there is no difference between the larger Municipal Theatres and the National Theatres (all "Court Theatres" became "National Theatres" in 1918), either in artistic or financial standing. About the middle of the last century, many private theatres were founded to compete with Court and Municipal theatres, particularly in Berlin. They were run on purely commercial lines. Almost all failed; but a few survived and even made a modest profit. However, the greatest figure of the German private theatre, Max Reinhardt, "the Great Magician," was not a product of this tradition. Another impulse was needed for the German theatre to reach the golden age at the beginning of the 20th century. And here, for the first time, we have to speak of "the theatre as an art form."

DURING A RECENT discussion of this subject, Kenneth Tynan (*Encore*, 1963) cited the example of Lessing (who worked as literary director in Hamburg with one of the best German companies between 1767 and 1769) in the struggle to establish a national theatre. Lessing acted not only as the company's adviser in the selection of plays, he also tried to awaken public interest in the theatre by writing those famous essays in dramatic criticism, the *Hamburger Dramaturgie*, which are to this day the model of all German theatre criticism. Regrettably, Lessing was asked by the actors after only a short time to restrict himself to the appraisal of plays; and the whole enterprise failed soon afterwards. But since then, "civic theatre activity," as Tynan calls it, has never entirely disappeared from German theatre life. Educated members of the middle classes, inspired by the

Weimar classicists and by the romantics, began to crowd the theatres and the young people, who demonstrated their enthusiasm from the gallery, gradually demanded the right to be heard. With more pronounced class differences and increasing organisation of the working classes, the young intelligentsia turned to the left. By the 'eighties, a situation had arisen which can only be described as explosive. The artificiality of the *Hoftheater* had become intolerable and standards had deteriorated generally. Princes still set the trend, and the burghers tried to emulate. The relatively small audiences consisted of country gentry, bankers, manufacturers. The *Volk* were excluded from the leading theatres. Cities like Berlin, Vienna, and Munich had theatres in the suburbs. But Viennese playwrights of genius like Raimund and Nestroy, to-day considered classics, were barred from the *Kaiserliche Hoftheater*. Instead, these theatres produced stale, moralistic Victorian comedies. In literature, a new style had long since established itself; but even towards the end of the Naturalist period, Ibsen's censor-banned plays had not yet been produced on the stage. The theatre tried to isolate itself from the general cultural evolution and, pandering to a hypocritical and doomed society, soon degenerated into a commodity of cheap entertainment.

In 1882, as a first protest against this development, prominent Berlin actors (following Lessing) formed a society to found the *Deutsches Theater*. (Even before this the "Meininger" ensemble had caused a sensation with their performances of the classics in the style of "historical naturalism.") The second protest had significant consequences. In 1889—following the example of the Parisian Antoine—Berlin intellectuals, led by Otto Brahm, founded an association called the *Freie Buehne* and proceeded to perform Ibsen and other banned authors to "closed audiences," thus bypassing censorship. The theatre opened with Ibsen's *Ghosts*, and during a performance of Gerhart Hauptmann's first play, *Before Sunrise*, there was an uproar such as had not been witnessed before in a Berlin theatre. That night marked the turning point and determined the future of the German theatre. Modern playwrights had carried the day. Soon afterwards, Otto Brahm took over the *Deutsches Theater*, and he was succeeded by Max Reinhardt in 1905. The golden age of the German theatre grew out of Lessing's concept of actors and authors working in close collaboration, on the one hand, and, on the other, the desire of modern intellectuals for a theatre of high artistic and literary merit which would reflect the times. Not even Hitler succeeded in removing the last traces of the greatness of the German theatre, as the activities of

Gustaf Gruendgens, Brecht's followers Erich Engel and Caspar Neher and directors Heinz Hilpert, Otto Falckenberg, Walter Felsenstein, and Juergen Fehling (who invited club-footed Goebbels to his mid-war production of *Richard III*) have shown. Following on the establishment of the middle class *Freie Buehne*, the trade-unions' *Volksbuehne* (which to-day has millions of members) was founded in Berlin. The domination of the ruling classes was broken. Theatres now produced all new writing of quality, irrespective of the source. Bernard Shaw transferred the first performances of several of his plays to German theatres. Reinhardt's fame was part of this "civic theatre activity"; Maxim Gorki's *The Lower Depths*, directed by Reinhardt, had a continuous run of 500 performances at a private theatre before it went into the repertory of the *Deutsches Theater*. In the twenties, Leopold Jessner became a worthy rival to Reinhardt as the director of the *Preussische Staatstheater*. Erwin Piscator founded his "Political Theatre," and Brecht set out anew on Lessing's road: a playwright intent on creating his own theatre.

IN THE "GOLDEN TWENTIES" the German theatre was a centre of unrivalled quality and talent, now nostalgically remembered. Growing political tension no doubt helped. An era in which the theatre is a forum for political ideas, and is taken more seriously by intellectuals than the actual field of political conflict, may never return—but it is an ideal of which many theatre people still dream. One still feels: this is what theatre ought to be. Moreover, the reasons why it is no longer so, and cannot become so in the foreseeable future, bring us to the disadvantages of the German theatre system.

SINCE 1945, the German theatre has lost the brilliance that comes of intensive artistic rivalry. The loss of Berlin as the capital has meant the loss of the artistic centre which attracted all the talent of the provinces. To-day, Berlin itself is provincial. Vienna too, handicapped by its political isolation, has become provincial. The German-language theatre has many limbs, but no head. Hamburg knows almost nothing of Munich, and Frankfurt knows even less of Cologne. The one has nothing to fear from the other, if only because larger cities set much more store by local prestige than by anything else. It was this preoccupation with prestige which was responsible for the fashion spectacle of the recent Munich *Opernfest* (on the occasion of the re-opening of the *Nationaltheater*). Once again, the ordinary

theatre-goer felt shut out. Rarely has the social style of the *Wirtschaftswunder* revealed its vulnerability quite so drastically as here.

AND OF THOSE WHO STILL flock to the theatre, few any longer have anything in common. They hardly know each other. They are strangers, pacing up and down in the foyer during the intervals. They are self-contained individuals, looking forward to an individual experience. This remoteness of the audience is one of the things that apparently drives playwrights into the camp of the *avant-garde*. It is the complaint of all the German theatre directors that "one no longer knows one's audience." Genuine tears and laughter have become a rarity—though when they do occur, it means that actors have succeeded in breaking down the barrier, and that is what every theatre enthusiast secretly hopes for.

Still, it is clearly wrong to assume that only enthusiasts go to the theatre. Many go because they always have; they don't go in a spirit of self-examination or reflection. Particularly those who cling to middle-class conventions (and this includes the prosperous prestige-seeking upper layer of the working classes) help to spread this sense of inertia during performances. The English theatre may be similarly afflicted, but there, at least, audiences do not occupy seats wholly or partly paid for from public funds.

If the idea of subsidies is an excellent one, the political agitation behind it is not always without ulterior motive. The *Laender* of the *Bundesrepublik* frequently display an all-too-human penchant for ostentation in the building of their theatres. As modern architecture tends to be austere functional, the best way to exhibit opulence and demonstrate welfare is by using costly building materials. If the older buildings can be saved, then they are elaborately and expensively restored to former splendour. Spiritual values? These new German theatres only bear witness to the pretentiousness of our *nouveaux riches*. The Bavarian Prime Minister recently spoke of the theatre as "a museum"; the same principle applies to both; expensive, ergo good. And the attitude of the audience does resemble that of the man who visits a museum—not because he likes looking at pictures, but because it is considered "the right thing to do." Perhaps one shouldn't set prosperity and culture in hostile juxtaposition. But in the theatre the marriage of prosperity and culture has had only negative consequences: it has created more difficulties than it has solved.

This listlessness of the audience is closely connected with that complacency resulting from material security, which has turned actors into

civil servants and theatres into emporia. Certainly, compared with the precarious financial standing of actors in other countries, the position of the German actor is enviable. The achievements of the German equivalent of Equity (founded in 1871) are remarkable. However, a slackening of artistic effort is inevitable when an actor knows that *it doesn't matter* if he gives a bad performance, or if he succumbs occasionally to the temptation to take things easy. Dismissals without notice are extremely rare, and are incurred only by serious misdemeanours. The non-renewal of a yearly contract is no tragedy: a *schauspieler* can always move to another theatre, another town. There are very few unemployed actors. Even without permanent engagement, an actor will always find a job on radio or television (rather less easily in films, where utter crisis still prevails). Any expansion of social benefits is, of course, to be welcomed. But the certitude of material security does have its negative side. It is with good reason that Fritz Kortner, one of the best-known German directors (and a liberal-progressive) has fiercely protested against the "spirit of trade unionism" among actors.

BUT LET ME speak of the system's advantages. Subsidies do enable German theatres to plan a programme which represents the classic theatre of the past, as well as most present-day international work. Several of Ionesco's plays were first performed in German theatres. The selection of plays is often ambitious—one can afford to be imaginative and original. Of the dramatists of the past, only those really worth reviving are taken up; and pride is taken in new discoveries in both contemporary German and foreign drama. As gambling on a new play can never mean financial ruin, one needn't fear audience reactions. The same audiences I have accused of inertia are unwilling to forgo their visit to the theatre, however outraged they may be by anything "modern." *Succès de scandale* has become the order of the day. There are theatre *Intendanten*—and these by no means the worst—who go all out to provoke public protest if only to jolt people out of their complacency. A great deal has been achieved: the latest annual programme survey of all German-speaking theatres (including the Eastern D.D.R.) shows these plays at the top of the list: Duerrenmatt's *Physicists* (1,598 performances in 59 theatres), Max Frisch's *Andorra* (934), Lessing's *Minna von Barnhelm* (530), Gerhart Hauptmann's *The Beaver Coat* (469), Peter Ustinov's *Photo Finish* (456). Not a bad list. True, *My Fair Lady* (and two operettas) top the list of musical works, but immediately following them are three operas by Mozart.

The objection that, in a subsidised theatre, the number of performances is less significant than the number of tickets sold, crumbles when one considers that available seating capacity is used up to 80% (against 55–60% in the 'thirties). Last year thirteen leading German theatres performed: 33% classical authors (about 20% Shakespeare with 2,104 performances); 39% contemporary plays (among them 1,222 performances of Brecht, in 58 theatres); 15% plays of the Ibsen–Hauptmann period; and only 12% light comedy (perhaps because cinema and television are a more suitable medium for light comedy). As private theatres receive small subsidies too, they are obliged not only to maintain a small permanent ensemble, usually headed by a prominent "guest artist," but also to include two or three plays of literary merit in their repertory. This means that the subsidised theatre is in a position to offer audiences a varied repertory—a repertory, as Tynan has formulated it for the British National Theatre, "of foreign and English plays, traditional and contemporary, tragedy and comedy, the experimental and the conventional, the unusual and the familiar..." But while the British National Theatre is thus able to set a style distinct from other British theatres, German theatre directors, who know only the repertory programme, are forced to chase after literary sensations and to try and lure them away from each other. And the result of their efforts is often only another kind of conformity.

WHEN I ASKED RECENTLY in London what people considered the "most revolutionary" element in the creation of the National Theatre, I was told: the ensemble company, the essential prerequisite for a comprehensive continuous repertory programme. But British friends of the theatre will be interested to learn that the ideal of a really comprehensive repertory has been achieved by only two German-speaking theatres: the *Schillertheater* in Berlin and the Vienna *Burgtheater*. These theatres have the largest ensembles in their respective countries. Berlin is still the most important theatre centre in Germany; Vienna may surpass it at times, but only in the number of theatres, not, I think, in quality. Both cities have an advantage not enjoyed by other cities: they are centres of film production. (Actually, most of the work done at film studios now is dubbing foreign films.) Actors, playing evenings, are able to supplement their income by working for film studios during the day. In this way, both theatres are able to maintain a large ensemble and to present a varied programme.

I have already mentioned that the number of first nights has declined. The number of

plays in the repertory has decreased in all theatres (except in Berlin and Vienna). In a medium-sized national or municipal theatre, there will now only be about twelve during a season. (In addition to this, there may be a few more at the "experimental studios," attached to the larger theatres.) But even these plays cannot be performed throughout the entire season, as many ensemble members have only six months (or even shorter-term) contracts. A considerable number of first nights are launched with guest stars, engaged for one or two plays only, who move on to another theatre after the expiration of their contract. This "guest artist system" is often denounced as a flaw in the German system. But this, I feel, is unfair. A system which offers the actor no adequate platform (as did Berlin forty years ago) on which to deploy his talents, is not providing him with all the opportunities he needs. He must change the locus of his activities; he must test himself before a different audience. The more temperamental actors, in particular, prefer a change of scenery in the course of their struggle to reach the top of the profession. Furthermore, cinema and television have altered the audience's taste; people expect star-casting for lead parts. It was an essential feature of the ensemble system that one actor—say, the juvenile lead—played all the roles of his type, from Romeo to Jimmy Porter. Since there are probably few Romeos who are also Jimmy Porters, one prefers to get hold of well-known actors as guest artists, who come as close as possible to the audience's preconceived image. The result, however, is a curtailment of the repertory.¹

THE ARTISTIC AIM has always been "perfectly coordinated ensemble-playing," and performances in which a star is supported by a middling or third-rate company are still rejected by German audiences. It is important that an ensemble company grow into an artistic unit in the course of rehearsal. The effort required of the individual actor is limited nowadays, since rehearsals have

become part of a working day in which hours are strictly observed and overtime is fiercely resented. Here, too, the absence of risk is making itself felt. As most actors who rehearse between 10 a.m. and lunch are playing a more or less important part in the repertory (often a different one every night), they tend to save their strength for the evening performance—a phenomenon which will, no doubt, be observed when the National Theatre in London gets under way. Exclusive concentration on a single part is possible only in the continuous run system. Ensembles conveying the sense of being a closely knit unit have become rare. They are usually moulded by a strong personality—by the late Gustaf Gruendgens, for instance. When he left Düsseldorf ten years ago to take over the *Deutsches Theater* in Hamburg, most of the actors engaged by him followed him there. His comment was: "I have my family. My successor, no doubt, will bring his own..." (He has.) This magnetism of the great personality—where the chance of *learning something new* still means more to an actor than the size of his fee—is one of the few positive aspects of German theatre. Personalities like Gruendgens are still to be found; perhaps they will suddenly appear where they are least expected; their existence inspires new hope for the German theatre. There are still quite a number of directors and actors who refuse to surrender to the paralysing effects of material security. There have been cases where a theatre manager risked losing the safe patronage of conservative audiences in order to attract a different type of audience, particularly the young. (In some instances—as in Bremen—this has worked.) The moving force of such personalities is the desire to resuscitate the great traditions of the German theatre, and to make it once more a major contributor to *Welttheater*.

AND IN LONDON? There is, of course, still plenty of genuine competition. Among actors who realise that their career depends on the success of every performance, there is far less slackness. London now has that apparently inexhaustible pool of good actors and actresses Berlin once prided itself on. Many of our German system's disadvantages, therefore, will not apply in London. Indeed, I am tempted to say: the German theatre system, whatever its faults at home, might suit London very well indeed.

¹ Successful plays are usually carried over from one season to the next. Seasons last from September to the end of June or beginning of July. However, plays and productions hardly ever last longer than two seasons—simply because the actors are no longer together in one company.

hans magnus enzensberger

three new poems

remote house

when i wake up
the house is silent.
only the birds make a noise.
through the window i see
no one. here
no road passes.
there is no wire in the sky
and no wire in the earth.
quiet the living things lie
under the axe.

i put water on to boil.
i cut my bread.
unquiet i press
the red push-button
of the small transistor.

“caribbean crisis . . . washes whiter
and whiter and whiter . . . troops ready to fly out . . .
phase three . . . that’s the way i love you . . .
amalgamated steel stocks are back to par. . . .”
i do not take the axe.
i do not smash the gadget to pieces.
the voice of terror
calms me ; it says :
we are still alive.

the house is silent.
i do not know how to set traps
or make an axe out of flint,
when the last blade
has rusted.