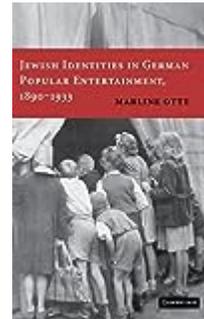




Marline Otte. *Jewish Identities in German Popular Entertainment, 1890-1933.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. xiv + 317 pp. £48.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-85630-0.



Reviewed by Anselm C. Heinrich (Department of Theatre, Film and Television Studies, University of Glasgow)

Published on H-German (January, 2007)

Circus not Einstein

This thoughtful, persuasive and intelligent study combines two areas, popular culture and Jewish history, which have been at the center of scholarly interest over the last few years, especially in terms of the relationship between Jewish and non-Jewish Germans before 1933, due to growing interest in the victims of the Holocaust. At the same time Marline Otte wants to move away from an interpretation of prewar Jews entirely as victims and questions the exclusive focus on Jewish victimhood. This approach is especially convincing in a study that is concerned with the diverse and crucial influence of Jewish performers and artists on German popular culture. Otte rightly claims that interpreting the decades prior to 1933 solely as a prelude to the Holocaust would deny the considerable achievements of Jews in the manifold forms of entertainment in the early twentieth century.

Marline Otte chooses an interesting approach as she deliberately concentrates on “the less articulate” (p. 2) and not on Jewish “stars” like Mendelssohn or Einstein. She draws a fascinating picture of Jewish performers, artists and impresarios during Wilhelmine and Weimar Germany and concentrates on three different types of en-

tertainment: circus entertainment, jargon theater and revue theater. These areas are particularly fascinating because by the turn of the nineteenth century, traditional concepts of bourgeois *Bildung* were successfully being challenged by other, enormously successful, forms of entertainment like the circus, which became the first true mass medium.

In terms of her chosen forms of entertainment Otte rightly laments a lack of research regarding questions of ethnic identity and concerning the significance of popular performances for historical interpretation. She claims that popular entertainment, because it operates across class and gender lines, has been undervalued by historians who preferred to focus on the “ideal type” public sphere (p. 13). Additionally the methodological problems with non-verbal sources have added to the reluctance to deal critically with popular entertainment.[1] Some of Otte’s findings correspond to other research on the *Kaiserreich*, especially in terms of its being less restrictive and offering more possibilities for artistic expression than previously thought. Jewish performers, for example, were more successful in Wilhelmine Germany

than during the Weimar Republic and met with less open hostility.

Otte points out that these three types of popular performance had three different peak times. Whereas the circus experienced its biggest successes in the late nineteenth century, jargon theaters blossomed during the years before 1914 and revue theater triumphed in the interwar period. Despite these quite distinctive time-frames, however, there are also interesting points of contact. In concentrating on the circus in the first of her three major chapters Otte makes it clear that Jews played a significant role in the rise and success of circus entertainment in Germany. For many poor Jewish families based in rural areas, the circus offered a chance to climb the social ladder in the booming cities where many of the former travelling circuses became stationary. In their magnificence, these circuses soon rivaled the country's leading theaters and even sought to outshine them in terms of respectability by claiming their roots lay in the circuses of ancient Rome. In contrast to elite forms of entertainment, these circuses drew audiences from all strata of society and circus proprietors became "bourgeois entrepreneurs" instead of simply "marginalized fairground performers" (p. 56). Otte's tendency, however, to paint a rather romantic picture of philanthropist Jewish circus directors, who were supposedly aware of family values, tradition and moral reputation, while harshly describing non-Jewish directors such as Paul Busch, Hans Sarrasani and Carl and Wilhelm Hagenbeck, as money-grubbing entrepreneurs solely interested in their own financial and social gain, is slightly irritating (pp. 56-57).

The circus' reputation, respectability and, by default, its survival as a profitable enterprise were at risk during the public debates over gender roles and "Americanization," so circus directors were at pains to uphold their impeccable reputation. In this respect connections to nobility proved important, especially for Jews who had been denied civil rights for so long. The First World War and its aftermath, however, ultimately marked the end of circus entertainment as a mass medium in Germany. Although many Jewish enterprises reopened for business after the war, by the mid-1920s growing antisemitism forced many of them to give up as audiences stayed away. In a poignant epilogue Otte illustrates that Jewish performers and artists not only faced the economic downfall of the 1920s, but a few years later the threat of death during the Nazi years and the Holocaust, which only a few survived.

In her second chapter Otte concentrates on jargon

theater with a particular focus on Berlin's Gebrüder Herrnfeld Theater and its rival, the Folies Caprice, both of which largely employed Jewish actors. Unlike Jewish circus performers, however, Jewish revue artists deliberately played out questions of identity. By doing so, Otte claims, jargon theater did not solely cater for unassimilated Jews but was part of a wider urban middle-class amusement scene attended by Jewish as well as non-Jewish Germans. Jargon theaters corresponded to a general interest in *Volkskultur* and catered to audiences interested in "folksy" topics. It did not remain, however, in the *Volkstheater* corner, because it mixed (Yiddish) performance traditions with contemporary Western burlesque theater. Here, for the first time, the special quality of jargon theaters, their presentation and negotiation of Jewish identities "in and through the presence of Gentiles" (p. 159), has been properly assessed. Similarly to Jewish circus entertainers, the Jewish jargon theaters suffered from increasing antisemitism and after 1916 many performers turned to alternative forms of entertainment. Because Otte concentrates so specifically on the Herrnfeld brothers, however, it is difficult to assess how successful and how influential the jargon theaters actually were. Apart from the Folies Caprice, how many other similar theaters existed in Berlin? Did they influence other enterprises? Also, the reader looks in vain for attendance and budget figures that could have shed more light on these ventures.

In the book's last chapter, Otte makes clear that Weimar's vibrant culture was deeply rooted in imperial Germany. Around 1900 no other form of entertainment captured the spirit of new departures, bourgeois optimism and curiosity better than revues. Otte concentrates on Berlin's leading venue, the Metropol Theater, which catered to two different sets of audiences, the elite and middle class, in opulent, amusing and sexually charged shows. In this context Otte is particularly interested in how far the Metropol helped to form a new elite in imperial Berlin, one which included wealthy and influential Jews.

Jews played a vital part in the success of revue theaters, but in contrast to their activity circus and jargon theaters, they did not play out their identity in this arena. Although the Metropol's director, Richard Schultz, disregarded ethnic milieus and collaborated with Jewish composers, such as Victor Hollaender, Rudolf Nelson and Jean Gilbert, and Jewish performers, like Fritzi Massary, most of these artists and performers did not primarily see themselves as Jewish and were not eager to put their ethnicity on show. Otte admits that apart from a few jokes

and references to Jewish stereotypes delivered by non-Jewish performers, Jewish identities did not play a significant role on the theater's stage. Thus the inclusion of revue theaters in this study may seem rather peculiar. To be fair, however, Otte admits that revue theater as a genre is problematic in terms of "Jewish autonomy and integration in German popular culture" (p. 202). She suggests that this quality might on the one hand be linked to the high degree of acculturation in this area and on the other to an increasingly hostile atmosphere, which made Jewish audiences and performers uneasy about public displays of their identities.

This also holds true for the Jewish Rotter brothers, who took over the Metropol in 1927 and included the theater in their vast entertainment empire. In Weimar's highly charged political climate, however, the Rotters faced antisemitic attacks. Even liberal commentators questioned their creative ambitions and accused them of "profit-oriented Manchesterism" (p. 252). The Nazis quickly jumped on this bandwagon and made the Rotters one of their prime propaganda targets, forcing them into exile and death in 1933.

Marline Otte's study is particularly strong when ar-

guing that circuses and theaters run by Jewish Germans did not particularly cater to Jews but played a significant role in the entertainment industry as a whole. These enterprises were in fact vital parts of popular culture in Germany. As such they were not aesthetically or culturally exceptional, but quite *normal*. This unexceptional quality may be the reason why, after the Holocaust, scholars have found it so difficult to deal with this rich subject matter. Thanks to Marline Otte our knowledge has been greatly increased and it is to be hoped that her book will spark similar studies in the future.

Note

[1]. The research situation in recent years, however, has become increasingly better. See, for example, Jacky Bratton and Ann Featherstone, *The Victorian Clown* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). More generally on new methodological approaches in theater history see Maggie Gale and Vivien Gardner, eds., *Women, Theatre and Performance: New Histories, New Historiographies* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000); and Jacky Bratton, *New Readings in Theatre History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Anselm C. Heinrich. Review of Otte, Marline, *Jewish Identities in German Popular Entertainment, 1890-1933*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. January, 2007.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=12771>

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.