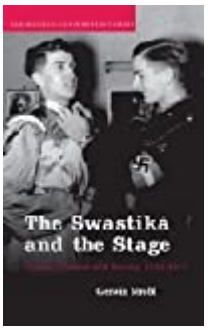
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Gerwin Strobl. *The Swastika and the Stage: German Theatre and Society, 1933-1945.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. xii + 341 pp. $95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-88076-3.

Reviewed by Christelle Le Faucheur (Department of History, University of Texas at Austin)

Published on H-German (May, 2009)

Commissioned by Susan R. Boettcher

Staging National Socialism

Considering the status of theater in German culture and the extensive efforts the National Socialist regime put into theater (up to a fourth of the Propaganda Ministry's budget, for example), it is astonishing that, with the exception of an excellent collection of essays edited by John London, scholars have scarcely touched the topic.[1] The first full-length study in English about the topic, this book finally fills an important gap in Third Reich and theater study. Gerwin Strobl wants to refine the image of German theater during the Third Reich, described as "a black hole of destruction from which no light can escape" (p. 1), and to move beyond a simple description of the brutality of Nazi politics and the mediocrity of Nazi plays. His goal is to contextualize and historicize theater politics of the time, and to explain the continuities, characteristics, and successes of contemporary theatrical productions. Exploring first the immediate and wider background, Gerwin Strobl paints a familiar picture of Weimar in crisis, but his emphasis falls on the importance of cultural productions.

According to the author, the radicalization of left-ist, republican, and avant-garde theater, such as Leopold JeÃner's productions of *Wilhelm Tell* or *Hamlet,* antagonized many archetypical *BildungsbÃ¼rger.* Future leading figures of Nazi theater, such as *Reichsdramaturg* Rainer SchlÃ¶sser or the leader of the Hitler Youth and head of the Vienna theater, Baldur von Schirach, are characteristic of the able, refined, and literate group of men attracted by National Socialist promises of restoring German culture. Strobl points to the Nazis' use of the crisis of German theater and the vibrant right-wing, *vÃ¶lkisch* theater reform movements that had existed in German since 1890. Diverse, active movements, such as *Volkstheater, Naturtheater,* or *Laienspiel,* were characterized by a strong antimodernist current and by antisemitism. They lobbied for changes in repertoire, called for censorship, and wooed new audiences. Allowing men to re-experience their own lives in traumatic episodes such as the Great War or the occupation of the Ruhr, new productions, such as Hann Johst's *Schlageter* (1933), emphatically played on emotions and, most importantly, allowed the audience to experience a long-desired cathar-

sis, something intellectualized republican theater had denied them. With their sylvan setting, monumental cast (a mix of up to seventeen thousand actors, laymen, and professionals), audience (up to sixty thousand), and evocation of national harmony, the populist and crudely propagandistic *Thingspiele,* a non-Nazi project, came to symbolize "national rebirth." While quickly utilized by Joseph Goebbels in his rivalry with Hermann GÃ¶ring and Robert Ley, the *Thingspiele* were finally abandoned, burdened under too many financial, artistic, and political problems. Goebbels tightened regulations to curb the proliferation of "ecstatic theater amateurism" (p. 78), resulting in *Weihespiele* (plays of solemnity), *Werkspiele* (factory plays), or *Heimatspiele.* In view of the lack of talent in plays about the Nazi Party, the Propaganda Ministry discouraged the use of the contemporary present as a topic. This preference led to a striking proliferation of historical, especially Prussian-themed, plays. This phenomenon was also rooted in audience enthusiasm for things of the past and in the Nazis' use of such plays for propagandistic purposes.

The middle of the book shows how major issues such as international politics, racism, and religious conflicts were played out in theatrical productions. Using fascinating archival material, especially correspondence from Rainer SchlÃ¶sser, Strobl explores the way in which theater became a factor in the relationship between the German state and its neighbors, especially France, Poland, and Czechoslovakia. The tactful use of the ban, and alternately, the promotion of propagandistic plays, unveils the link between theater and foreign policy. A further chapter tackles the issue of racism, depicting conflicting opinions and reactions, rooted in a racial theory itself riddled with inconsistencies that allowed contradictory interpretations. Yet, while Goebbels often expressed his frustration about "racial foot-dragging" and slow "de-Jewification" in the early 1930s, competition between rival cultural agencies led to rapid radicalization of Nazi policies in the theater and elsewhere. In addition to state-sponsored antisemitism, hardened Judeophobia, ugly opportunism, and simple spite cost the jobs and the lives of thousand of theater practitioners. As Strobl points out, while no one was forced to become racist after 1933, "*ArtbewuÃstsein* was a precondition for achieving or maintaining access to the stage" (p. 112). The effective system of control and censorship dealt not only with actors or *Intendanten* but also with playwrights. With the exception of an Aryanized version of *The Merchant of Venice,* plays rarely displayed outright antisemitism, a concession to the general lack of such sentiment among audiences. Strobl's research reveals that, similarly to their treatment of foreign policy issues, censors were careful not to upset a fragile domestic consensus with issues such as "gypsies," procreation, or polygamy. Religion was another contested topic. Strobl effectively shows how the Nazi *Kulturkampf* was played out in the theater. Sponsored by Heinrich Himmler and Rosenberg, Low German theatricals such as *De Stedinge* (1934) were aggressively anti-Christian and mirrored the neo-pagan feeling of many regime followers. The regime's promotion, or "toleration," of anti-Catholic plays, however, had to be adjusted in light of public reaction. Such plays often backfired in Catholic areas such as Bavaria and (later) Austria, which also fought against increasing difficulties to perform their traditional religious plays.

The last three chapters examine the political reality under which theater had to operate in the Third Reich. Surprisingly late in the book (chapter 7), Strobl delineates the "messy nightmare" (p. 154) under the appearance of neat organization, a combination that reflected the Nazi approach to government. The chaos was also rooted in the competition between the Reich Theater Chamber (under Goebbels), the Rosenberg Office, Ley's Labor Front, and GÃ¶ring, who attempted to establish sole control over theaters in his own Prussian fiefdom. SchlÃ¶sser was in charge of bringing a degree of coherence to Nazi *Theaterpolitik*, while remaining careful about internal tensions, regional particularities, individual ambitions, and changing circumstances. Strobl unveils the arbitrary nature of Nazi theater regulations, a combination of patronage and intimidation, which hit amateur dramatics and religious plays hard and made prominent actors or *Intendanten* such as Gustaf GrÃ¼ndgens dependent on Nazi paladins, such as GÃ¶ring.

The inconsistencies of Nazi theater politics were rooted in two rival conceptions of theater and ensuing clashes between the propagandistic intents and the traditional German concepts of *Kultur,* which saw theater as a pleasurable civic duty (and a source of national pride). In addition to a lack of talented National Socialist theater professionals, the multivalence of theater made it a difficult medium for effective propaganda. Propaganda plays were often too heavy-handed to enjoy long-term success, and could even backfire, a result that revealed audiences' critical sentiments toward the regime. According to Strobl, the Nazis' artistic bankruptcy enabled star *Intendanten* such as GrÃ¼ndgens, Heinrich George, Heinz Hilpert, or JÃ¼rgen Fehling to "recapture the principal playhouses for the *BildungsbÃ¼rger* and their favoured verities" (p. 194). While the political leadership used

actors to burnish the Reich's cultural credentials, some theater practitioners, while furthering their own careers, were noticeably out of step with Nazi ideals. Their attempts to undermine Nazi notions of the heroic, as well as their staging of foreign, "liberal," multivalent plays, and apolitical classics, were read during the Third Reich, and especially after the war, as a fight to sustain a bulwark against Nazi barbarity.

Strobl concludes with a chapter that traces the trajectory of German theater from the near bankruptcy of the 1932-33 season through Nazi opulence to the physical destruction of the war years. The conspicuous National Socialist cultivation of *Kultur* was based on both idealistic and deeply cynical motives. Each section of the public was now offered its own theater, while the theater conferred legitimacy upon the government, becoming its public face. Increasing demand for performances and loyalty of the public to its favorite actors has long bedeviled analysis of theater in the Third Reich. Strobl himself is eager to contextualize (if not justify) the behaviors of theater practitioners. Glossing quickly over the role played by the Nazis in terms of renovation of theaters, elevation of the status of the artist, and benefits to individual actors, Strobl points to the increasing difficulties encountered by productions, from shortage of heat, materials, and men, to air raids and political pressures. While acknowledging the important concessions many artists made, the author is more interested in the positive role theater practitioners played, from helping victims of the regime to preserving, together with a knowledgeable audience, the last bastion of German culture.

In this book, Strobl has successfully contextualized Third Reich theater. His first chapters about the Weimar productions are helpful and necessary for understanding the changes and the continuities that occurred during the Nazi regime. Despite the lack of theoretical framing, the author manages to address the three axes of cultural production: text, context, and reception. He skillfully combines close text readings with use of archival material, much of it discussed extensively for the first time, to uncover the role of theater in Germany society. Nonetheless, *The Swastika and the Stage* sadly leaves out several important aspects of theatrical production in Germany during this period. A treatment of the Jewish theater, German theater in occupied territories, and theatrical productions in concentration camps, for example, would be necessary to complete the picture. As a solid overview, however, this volume will certainly inspire further works.

Note

[1]. John London, ed., *Theatre under the Nazis* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).

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

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

Citation: Christelle Le Faucheur. Review of Strobl, Gerwin, *The Swastika and the Stage: German Theatre and Society, 1933-1945*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. May, 2009.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=24743

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.