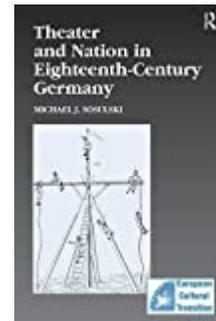




Michael J. Sosulski. *Theater and Nation in Eighteenth-Century Germany: Disciplined Bodies.* Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007. x + 178 pp. \$99.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7546-3719-6.



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

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National Theaters without the “National”

In this illuminating study, Michael Sosulski traces, discusses, and evaluates the origins of the various national theaters in eighteenth-century Germany. Sosulski links these playhouses to a growing sense of nationhood that not only existed long before political unity was achieved, but also developed much earlier than previously thought. Sosulski links the growing awareness of nationhood in the course of the eighteenth century to attempts at laying down rules for actors and developing acting styles. This connection is intriguing and constitutes Sosulski’s most important and original finding. At the same time, this concentration makes the book title seem slightly confusing because the focus on actors, acting, and acting reform does not become immediately obvious and—interesting as it may be—could have resulted in a rather narrow investigation.

In opening his study, Sosulski states correctly that the eighteenth century has not so far been at the center of attention when it comes to German theater historiography, although it has much to offer regarding its “contribution to Germany’s national identity” (p. ix). To fill this

lacuna, Sosulski looks at different national theaters and “discourses concerning the body, texts, and nationhood” (p. ix). Interestingly and appropriately for this particular project, Sosulski uses a methodology based on an interdisciplinary perspective and takes account of a range of sources.

In turning his attention to Germany’s national theaters, Sosulski asks the simple but fundamental question of what it actually meant to theaters like Mannheim’s to call them “national” when German national unity in political terms was still far from being achieved (and, in fact, only materialized nearly a century after the Mannheim playhouse opened in 1781). Also, how did such claims manifest themselves in the daily conduct of the theater business? To be sure, these grand names rarely saved their institutions from having to deal with rather mundane problems, particularly constant financial struggles, as the “nation” was far from prepared to subsidize these playhouses. With regard to repertoire, it was not only difficult to find plays of decent literary quality but theater managers actually did not seem to mind if repertoires did

not reflect the grand ambitions suggested by their playhouses' names. It became apparent that although a broad section of the educated public welcomed the idea of an elevated form of drama and theater, it did not sufficiently support these venues. Many of these houses either returned to the same old repertoire of "cheap" amusement they had originally turned against, or faced ruin when their financial backers expected to see a return for their investment. Despite such difficulties however, the national theater idea remained prevalent over the following decades—a fact that makes it even more astonishing that almost no research on the topic has been done.

One reason for this lack of interest may be the commonplace claim of an "absence of a broad-based sense of national consciousness among Germans in the eighteenth century" (p. 3). Sosulski is able to refute this assertion, and refers to a number of excellent studies on evolving concepts of nationhood and nationalism. However, although Sosulski's literature review (both regarding contemporary sources and research literature) is largely convincing regarding the situation in Germany, I would have liked to see him open up this debate spatially, chronologically, and critically by engaging with the increasing number of critical studies that treat the concepts associated with national theater histories.[1] This criticism, however, should not take away from some of the crucial findings he presents. Sosulski is able to show that the concept of a particular German nationhood was more powerful than the various national theaters themselves and decisive in shaping cultural practices associated with the theater. Crucially, he finds, this concept of German nationhood had largely manifested itself before the Napoleonic Wars. In a nation still lacking political unity, theater became a perfect space in which to imagine the nation and perform a German identity. And—linked to the concept of German identity—theater also acquired an educational function as well as one of entertainment.

As part of the introduction, Sosulski offers a brief historical sketch of the four most influential German national theaters of the period: those in Hamburg, Vienna, Berlin, and Mannheim. Although their specific histories are different, some overarching themes emerge, and they clearly relate to some of Sosulski's earlier speculations. Most of these playhouses were founded following the campaigns of influential *Bürger* and only subsequently may have received royal patronage. All were founded with high hopes for the staging of uplifting, educational, and specifically German repertoires, but their protagonists were soon forced to realize that these ideals did not necessarily guarantee sufficient revenue. Man-

agements had to be pragmatic and included the odd work of August von Kotzebue or ballet to fill the venues. Still, all of these ventures—short-lived as some of them may have been—greatly influenced the theater landscape of German-speaking Europe.

In the first chapter, Sosulski offers readings and analyses of selected writings about the national theater and meaning of nationhood by some of its most prominent theorists and advocates. He concentrates on Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Friedrich Schiller, Johann Elias Schlegel, and Friedrich Møller. Sosulski argues that the word "nation" stood not only for "a community of common language, customs, culture, and temperament, but also for an ethical community of shared values and conduct" (p. 14). This stress on customs and mores (*Sitten und Sittlichkeit*) is fascinating and forms a solid basis for Sosulski's argument for a specific understanding of nationhood that was in place by the mid-eighteenth century. National theaters were seen as not only expressing a national identity but also furthering it across regional borders.

The two subsequent chapters offer a survey of actors, acting, and the material conditions surrounding their work. Sosulski is especially interested in the craft side of things here and discusses changes in acting styles in detail, particularly in relation to Konrad Ekhof. Sosulski engages with patterns of "collective, disciplined movement" (p. 14), which he traces through education programs at schools, the military, and acting academies which, he argues, contributed significantly to the forming of a particular identity. In chapter 4, Sosulski uses reforms of acting styles as an example that allows us to "examine the theatre's development into a privileged site for identity formation" (p. 15). Sosulski concentrates on one of the most famous actors of his time, August Wilhelm Iffland, as well as a largely forgotten play by David Beil, to investigate the mirror as a central metaphor for the function of theater. The final chapter eventually concentrates more closely on writing for the stage and an increasing critique of the idea of drama and theater representing a mirror, in particular with its alleged function of access to truth. Sosulski rightly links these new developments with the emerging *Sturm und Drang* movement, and in particular Schiller's *The Robbers* (1781).

Overall, Sosulski's book is original, fascinating, and engaging. It can only be hoped that it will contribute to an increasing interest in contextualization in German theater historiography.

Notes

[1]. See, for example, S. E. Wilmer, ed. *Writing and Theatre and Cultural Legitimation in England, France, and Rewriting National Theatre Histories* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2004) and Loren Kruger, *The National Stage: America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

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