

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Robert J. Goldstein.** *The Frightful State: Political Censorship of the Theater in Nineteenth-Century Europe.* New York: Berghahn Books, 2009. 310 S. \$95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84545-459-3.

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## **R.J. Goldstein (Hrsg.): The Frightful State**

The title of this collection of essays on theatre censorship in six countries (or empires) in the long nineteenth century is well chosen. From the perspective of European rulers and the censors they employed, the theatre between the French Revolution and the First World War – roughly the period dealt with – was a frightful place. While no monarch dared to abolish it outright, it was clearly an extremely dangerous space, the largest arena for public gatherings next to churches. And thus it was always potentially a place where emotions could be inflamed, subversive ideas spread, and from which revolutions could emanate. This is also the first book to my knowledge that attempts to survey theatrical censorship in such a comparative fashion: press censorship having been much better covered by historians. The countries surveyed are Germany (Gary D. Stark), France (Robert J. Goldstein), Russia (Anthony Swift), Spain (David T. Gies), Italy (John A. Davis) and the Habsburg monarchy (Norbert Bachleitner). The notable omission is, of course, England, which the editor, Goldstein, justifies with reference to the easy availability of research on the subject. This is correct and indeed a central function of the volume is to survey existing research in the various European languages, thus synthesizing specialized publications not easily accessible to the monolingual reader. The achievement of the book is, however, more than to just provide a resume of existing research; for theatre historians, most whom tend to focus on one country or culture, the volume provides a fascinating comparative contextualization of censorship practices. It makes the reader

aware of the surprising overall uniformity of censorship practices, so much so that the editor can state in his summary chapter: ‘the mechanics of theater censorship were fundamentally similar in almost all European countries’ (p. 266). This fundamental similarity has the effect of a certain repetitive sameness if one reads the book in the order of the chapters, as reviewers tend to do. I suspect, however, that most readers will read selectively those chapters pertaining to the theatrical cultures of interest.

The country chapters are framed by two editorial essays by Goldstein, which provide excellent comparative perspectives that the individual chapters cannot. He argues that the theatre was much more rigorously regulated and controlled in terms of prior or preventative censorship than the printed word. He cites numerous contemporary sources, often the censors themselves, that articulate the widespread fear of the power of theatre to arouse the passions (a very old anxiety) because of the collective nature of theatrical communication (as opposed to the private, individual nature of reading). In its collectivity, the theatrical audience was deemed to possess the greatest potential for political unrest. Another recurrent pattern in all European theatrical censorship is its class sensitivity. Theatre was considered a greater threat than the printed word, especially in the early part of the century. This is because the extremely low levels of literacy meant that the ‘lower classes’ were basically deprived access to subversive and seditious ideas. The theatre, as an oral and affordable medium (Goldstein and other contributors provide illuminating statistics on

economic aspects), offered no such barriers. A corollary to such class consciousness was a differential censorship practice for legitimate and popular theatres. Finally, he stresses correctly the central place theatre held as a forum for public life throughout Europe, whether in the courtly or the popular varieties, which made it even more liable to regulation and control. This centrality grew as the century progressed because theatre became increasingly deregulated as the monopolizing licensing systems were abolished and theatre could test itself against the play of market forces (in some countries more than others). We learn that theatre censorship remained in place long after press censorship was abolished in many countries by mid-century. Theatre censorship remained in force: in France until 1906, in Germany until 1918, in Austria, on and off until 1955, and of course in England until 1968! So what was the real problem? At base, theatre censors were teatrologists *avant la lettre*. Pre-empting by almost a century the founding father of German *Theaterwissenschaft*, Max Herrmann's famous distinction between the printed drama and the performed text, the French minister of Justice, Jean-Charles Persil, argued *pars pro toto* for his many colleagues in 1835 for the reimposition of theatrical censorship despite the abolition of censorship in the 1830 constitution. The latter, he argued only protected the dissemination of opinions via the printed word as they address only the mind. But when opinions are converted into *acts* by the presentation of a play or the exhibit of a drawing, one addresses people gathered together, one speaks to their eyes. (p. 74) The ability of theatrical representation to bypass the conventions of rational debate the reasoned exchange of opinions formulated in writing between educated gentlemen, in other words the classical Habermasian public sphere made it an extremely protean and unpredictable factor in public life. Hence there is the need for control.

The individual contributions provide variations on the same recurrent themes. Some approach the topic

more systematically, for example Gary Stark's extremely well documented discussion of German theatrical censorship, whereas others, most contributions in fact, tend to follow a chronological trajectory structured around dynastical shifts or changes in government. Despite all regional variations and these were considerable within countries, as Stark shows for Germany where controls tended to be in the hands of municipal authorities censorship represented, as John Davis argues for Italy, simply one dimension of the emergence of the modern European bureaucratic state. [â] It was a critical instrument in state attempts to control ideas and opinions (p. 191).

What all authors also document, apart from an unrelenting pressure to apply prior censorship and thus control public discourse, was the widespread fear of political allusion, even in texts where it was probably not intended. *Ipsa facto*, one can deduce that nineteenth century spectators across classes had the ability and desire to allegorize and construct political allegories from the most apparently innocuous material. Repeatedly, the contributors document cuts and amendments to classics and new works for fear that political parallels to existing regimes and situations might be construed. This resulted in general bans on certain subjects: on the presentation of the current monarchs (of course) but also their dynastic forbears, as well (exceptions were occasionally made); allied countries, religious figures and symbols.

All contributions contain extended bibliographical essays, which provide an excellent departure point for further reading. It is, I think, significant that the majority of the authors, and the best contributions, are by historians rather than theatre historians. Why this is, I cannot say. It suggests that more interdisciplinary dialogue is solely needed if (real) historians command a central topic of theatre history better than theatre historians do. Whatever the reasons, this collection can certainly be commended to cultural and theatre historians alike.

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