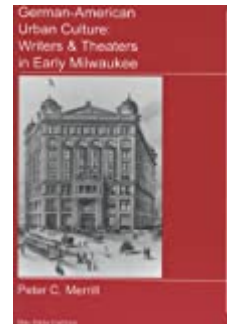




Peter C. Merrill. *German-American Urban Culture: Writers and Theaters in Early Milwaukee.* Studies of the Max Kade Institute for German-American Studies. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000. 128 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-924119-03-3.



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From Bertschey's Hall (1851) to the Pabst Theater (1895): German-American Theater in Milwaukee, Wisconsin

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The author, Peter C. Merrill, was a professor in the Department of Languages and Linguistics at Florida Atlantic University from 1968 to 1998, and is well known for his many publications concerning German-American artistic and cultural life. A number of his essays and books have previously appeared in the series of the Max Kade Institute. The Institute has published much valuable research concerning the history of German-speaking immigrants to America.

The latest case study of Peter C. Merrill is again part of the series and is introduced by the Institute's director, Joseph C. Salmon. In the Foreword, Salmon points out that Merrill has prepared the way for promising "future research, based on the author's decades of study" (p.4). This reviewer agrees that Merrill's scholarly work on German-American urban culture deserves the attention of theater historians, cultural sociologists and all those who are interested in tracing European influences

in nineteenth-century American regional life.

Most fascinating for the theater historian are the essays devoted to Milwaukee's theater scene. However, each essay in the collection contributes to an understanding of the complex German-language intellectual milieu. Most of the writers discussed by Merrill were immigrants from Germany, Austria and Switzerland. The main focus is the city of Milwaukee, which prided itself in being a "German Athens" (p. 96) in the nineteenth century and a significant center of German culture in America. Merrill lists his previously published essays, which form the major part of this study, in the preface (p. 5). In this volume, they appear in revised and re-edited versions. References to the most recent scholarly literature and bibliographies follow the individual chapters. The final essay presents a synthesis of the volume's preceding nine articles.

In the first chapter, the author gives his readers an overview of a great number of writers of German origin. Some supported themselves in America as salesmen, officers, lawyers, teachers, journalists, city clerks or civil servants. Some, already well educated in the homeland,

were ordained priests; one of these, Friedrich Katzer, had a distinguished career in the church and eventually became Archbishop of Milwaukee in 1891. Some had to flee Germany during or after the 1848 Revolution. Merrill points out that while most of the German texts produced by those authors provide considerable historical information, “only a few works stand out for their aesthetic qualities” (p. 21). Nevertheless, he suggests that some of these authors and their works deserve serious investigation today—Conrad Krez, Julius Gugler, Otto Ruppig (p. 22). The most famous of all of them, Mathilde Anneke, whose literary works have been rediscovered and republished, has already been the subject of recent scholarly investigation.

Chapters 3 and 4 give the reader an overview of the general popularity of German-American theater in the nineteenth century. The repertoire, the genre of the plays, their topics and the taste of the audience are outlined. With German immigration at its peak, it is understandable that German communities in the United States supported numerous German-language theaters. The theater served as a meeting place where cultural values and traditions could be reinforced and relived. The great majority of plays performed on the Milwaukee stage were also popular in Germany, including plays by such classic German dramatists as Schiller, Goethe, Lessing and Kleist. The repertoire also included contemporary works and comedies by Nestroy, Fulda, and Kotzebue, operettas, and translations from non-German sources. New were the more than sixty German-American plays documented by Merrill. Unfortunately, few copies of these dramatic texts could be located. Only through mention in the German-language press could the author trace their reception. Chapters 6 and 7 shed some light on the importance of the *Feuilleton* and the value of press records for this and future research.

Merrill portrays some German-American authors in greater detail in Chapters 4 and 5. Mathilde Anneke, Charles Christian Esselen, Julius Gugler, Willibald Winckler, and Wilhelm Mueller were well known to their audiences. Some of their plays, such as “Im gelobten Land” (“In the Promised Land”), performed as early as 1851 by amateur groups, portrayed immigrant life in America. Others with a New York setting included scenes from the Bowery, such as “Die Armen und die Reichen” (“The Poor and the Rich”), or they had topical subjects. Performances of operettas and operas were also highlights of that time.

The next two chapters provide a close look at two

writers in a more detailed way. One of them, Milwaukee salesman, accountant and writer Anton Thormaehlen, had immigrated from Varel near Oldenburg to America at the age of 26. Between 1852 and 1892, he had actively engaged in the social life of the city. Merrill mentions that at this time the German community in Milwaukee constituted half of the city’s population. No wonder then that its population could rely on six German-language dailies, dozens of other periodicals in German, numerous German social clubs, choral groups, an opera house, and an established theater, the “Stadt Theater”, as well as a famous institute for the training of German teachers. Merrill goes on to provide an analysis of Thormaehlen’s published poetry, which captured the German-American experience in the New World—the arrival of immigrants at New York, and their struggles and sacrifices. Chapter 5, devoted entirely to Ernst Anton Zuendt (1819-1897), documents the author’s works for the stage and his active participation at a time when the city’s German-language performances had been well established. Amateur groups generally performed plays by German-American authors, and Merrill’s list of such authors is quite impressive (p. 53). He points out that amateur productions were often patronized by audiences who shared a sense of political commitment with playwrights and performers. The plays were, therefore, often staged by groups within larger organizations, such as the Turnerbund and the Socialist Party. Unfortunately, less than half of Zuendt’s works were ever published, but Merrill supplies the reader with an impressive list of the unpublished plays, dramatic prologues, and translations of foreign works for the stage.

The fact that most of the German-American authors of belletristic prose of the nineteenth century were newspaper editors is astonishing. Inspired by the “Projekt Zeitungsroman” (p. 67) at Berlin’s Technische Universität, Merrill made a systematic inventory of all literary prose contributions printed in the Milwaukee *Banner und Volksfreund* and its successor, the *Freie Presse*, for the period 1879-1885. Chapter 6 is devoted to the “Serial Novel in the German-American Press (p. 64ff.). Sixty-three serialized works were located, but only a few were by German-American writers. The absence of prominent German-American works, despite their limited aesthetic value is astonishing. Such works reflected the problems the immigrants encountered in finding a place for themselves in the new land. Merrill hopes that future scholars who study German-Americana will be able to explain this absence.

An examination of the Sunday literary supplements

of two Milwaukee newspapers over a six-year period from 1879-1885 documents the choice of authors and texts that supplied preferred reading material to the city's Germans. A total of 697 literary pieces were covered by the survey. Most of the works were by German or Austrian writers. Translations of fifteen American works and thirty-six works by outstanding figures of the time (Spielhagen, Zola, Heyse, de Maupassant) were recorded.

Chapters 8, 9 and 10 combine, on a larger scale, Merrill's previous research on German theaters in Milwaukee, their repertoire of literature and music and their architecture. He presents a detailed but condensed description of the history of the architecture of the many places of performance, among them the famous "Stadt Theater", the "Grand Opera House", the "Pabst Theater", and the directors or sponsors who were closely associated with those buildings. A well-chosen selection of illustrations of the actual structures accompanies these chapters. Many of the smaller theaters and halls were destroyed by fire in the course of time and locations had to be changed frequently. Companies had to rely on the enthusiasm and generosity of their sponsors. Even the "Grand Opera House" often provided the stage for German plays. In 1890, it became the famous "Pabst Theater",

still today a familiar Milwaukee landmark. When the building was destroyed by fire, the wealthy brewer Frederick Pabst provided funds to rebuild the theater. An impressive history of the "Pabst" traces its years of slow decline after the First World War up to the year of its forced closing in 1935. Restoration projects, which Merrill outlines, and changing trends in American theater culture have changed the landmark theater, but Merrill forecasts a bright future for the elegantly rebuilt theater.

Added to this chapter are insightful commentaries with bibliographical references on the influences of German immigrants on the general art scene in America, on monumental public sculpture, on panoramic painting and on lithography. Merrill explores the influence of German-trained architects on the architecture of American cities and how their expertise shaped not only the architectural design of American mansions, churches, clubs, gymnastic halls and schools, but also entire neighborhoods. The author ends his case study on German-American urban culture with an assessment of German immigrant communities according to their urban or rural location and their religious affiliation. Peter C. Merrill has indeed laid the groundwork for future research into German immigrant culture.

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