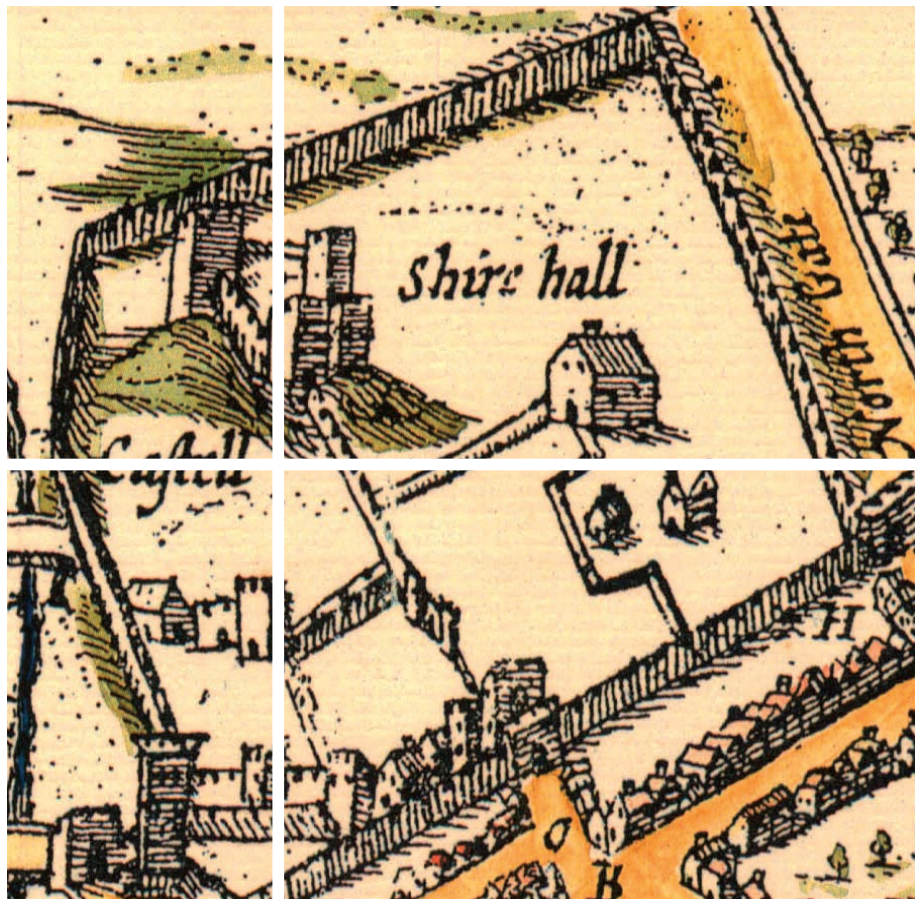


# Cardiff Historical Papers



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## Theatre in the Third Reich: a bibliographical survey

More than six decades after the end of the Third Reich, an extraordinary dearth of literature on the subject of theatre under the Nazis remains. The lacuna is so pronounced that those stumbling across it are sometimes moved to express their surprise in print. Take the author of the chapter on the performing arts in the prestigious multi-volume history of Nazi Germany at war, *Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg*, published in 2004: 'Hinter dem Interesse an Film und Rundfunk stehen theatergeschichtliche Forschungen völlig zurück.'<sup>1</sup> A few years earlier, at the beginning of the new millennium, the foremost American specialist in Nazi theatre struck a similar note: 'seldom has theatre operated under such conditions, and seldom with so much scholarly neglect.'<sup>2</sup> Whilst the situation has begun to improve a little over the past decade, it remains appropriate to talk of comparative scholarly neglect. This is particularly true amongst historians: full-length historical studies on theatre in the Third Reich in English or German can be counted on the fingers of one hand.

It is instructive to compare the coverage of theatre in the Nazi years with that of the preceding eras in German theatre. The elegant and illuminating studies of Peter Jelavich on Berlin cabaret and Munich theatrical modernism, the older books by Peter Gay, Michael Patterson or John Willett, or most recently Andrew Bonnell's study of Social Democracy and the Volksbühne movement, *The People's Stage*, all demonstrate the historical resonance of German theatre, and they highlight the dearth of comparable studies on the Third Reich.<sup>3</sup> Indirectly, they also suggest one reason for the ongoing lack of research – for these studies on Wilhelmine and

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1 Birthe Kundrus, 'Totale Unterhaltung? Die kulturelle Kriegführung 1939 bis 1945 in Film, Rundfunk und Theater', in Jörg Echternkamp (ed.), *Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg*, Vol. 9: *Die deutsche Kriegsgesellschaft* (Munich: DVA, 2004), p. 114.

2 Glen Gadberry (ed.), *Theatre in the Third Reich, the Prewar Years: Essays on Theatre in Nazi Germany* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1995).

3 See inter al. Peter Jelavich, *Munich and Theatrical Modernism: Politics, Playwriting and Performance, 1890–1914* (Cambridge: MA, Harvard University Press, 1985); Peter Jelavich, *Berlin Cabaret* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); Andrew Bonnell, *The People's Stage in Imperial Germany: Social Democracy and Culture* (London: Routledge, 2005); Peter Gay, *Weimar Culture: The Outsider as Insider* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1968); Michael Patterson, *The Revolution in German Theatre, 1900–1933* (London:

Weimar theatre betray an unmistakable admiration (and perhaps even affection) for the German modernist enterprise. Nazi theatre makes for a less engaging topic.

Its neglect cannot simply be due to cultural disdain, however, for film, architecture, music, and the visual arts in the Nazi era have received considerable attention: a glance at the catalogues of British and American publishers reveals hectic publication schedules in these areas. For this, too, the reasons are perhaps not so difficult to surmise. Much of Nazi cultural history as currently practiced in Britain and the United States is carefully selected to require from its students little or no knowledge of German (and, indeed, no more than a passing acquaintance with wider German culture or history). Theatre tends to make greater demands than that.

Yet the comparative neglect of Nazi theatre by historians also extends to the German-speaking countries themselves. Here too, the reasons are apparent, and they have to do with sources. Theatre is a fleeting art. Its effect on audiences may be no more transient than that of a film or the contemplation of a canvas, yet the agent of that effect cannot readily be accessed after the event. Play texts reveal little about actual productions, drawings of sets or costumes next to nothing about the acting; photographs are forever silent,<sup>4</sup> but theatre relies on sound. Occasional audio recordings, meanwhile, fail to convey the visual effect. Theatre programmes or playbills often deal in generalities rather than offering specifics about a given production. That leaves reviews as the most important tool in reconstructing a theatrical event and its impact on audiences. And here the student of Nazi theatre promptly encounters an additional problem: that of Nazi press censorship. Goebbels actually banned traditional reviews in 1936 because there had been too many negative notices about Nazi dramatists or the work of Nazi directors in what the Nazis called the 'bourgeois' press. Instead, the Propaganda Ministry inaugurated the practice of so-called

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Routledge & Kegan, 1981); John Willett, *The Theatre of the Weimar Republic* (New York: Holmes & Mayer, 1988).

4 For an example of how effective discussions of photographs can be (if backed up by other material), however, see Barbara Lesák, *Von der Pose zum Ausdruck: Theaterfotografie 1900–1930* (Vienna: Christian Brandstätter, 2003). Significantly, the study breaks off on the eve of the Third Reich. Supporting material, allowing a reading of photographs in context, tends to be available only in the case of the leading directors. See for instance the catalogue of the 1999 exhibition at the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin of the Gründgens pa-

*Kunstbetrachtung* [reflection on a work of art]. The result was predictably anodyne and uninformative.

This leaves theatre administration (either at local or national level) as a possible avenue of research – but here, too, there are problems. The Propaganda Ministry was hit twice in separate devastating air raids. Entire runs of records were destroyed. Only stray files that had been in circulation to other offices on the nights the Allied bombers struck survived. Whilst it is impossible to quantify the overall losses with any degree of certainty, the gaps are obvious enough. For instance, the records of the Reich Theatre Chamber on the *Thingspiel* – the vast theatrical experiment in the early years of the regime – have vanished practically in their entirety.

There is also evidence – or at least a strong suspicion – of later sifting. The files on individual playwrights and the censorship reports on plays submitted to the Propaganda Ministry evidently escaped the bombing, for an impressive number of them is extant. Yet there are curious gaps in the documentation. Not a single file survives on any of the most prominent Nazi theatre practitioners. It is hard to believe that this was the result of precision bombing by Allied air forces. The Propaganda Ministry, with its ideologically dedicated staff, is known to have destroyed large numbers of files as the Red Army closed in on Berlin in the spring of 1945. Indeed, the head of the Nazi theatre administration, the Reichsdramaturg Rainer Schlösser, was killed by a Red Army soldier while attempting to enter his former offices *after* the fall of Berlin.

The final complication occurred after the war. What survived of the Propaganda Ministry's files was then split, like Germany itself. The Federal Archives in Koblenz housed what had surfaced in the Western zones. The Eastern collection, which contained important series of documents, was kept in the Central Archive of the GDR at Potsdam. Although both collections were accessible to historians from either side of the ideological divide in theory, in practice, often they were not, especially during the 'hot' phases of the Cold War. The files were re-united only after German reunification and are now housed in the Bundesarchiv Berlin-Lichterfelde.

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pers: Dagmar Wallach, *Aber ich habe nicht mein Gesicht: Gustaf Gründgens – Eine deutsche Karriere* (Berlin: Henschel, 1999).

They have been given new *Signaturen*, so that the numbers in older references no longer correspond to the files. Thus, it is not altogether surprising that historians have fought shy of the subject. Most research on the stage in the Third Reich was (and remains) the province of theatre specialists or literary critics, and has often been conducted with no reference whatsoever to Propaganda Ministry files or other official documents.

The first of these studies came soon after the war. They took the form of two doctoral theses in *Theaterwissenschaft*: one Austrian, the other (West) German. Both were submitted at a time when memories of the Third Reich were still fresh. Alfred Hager's 1950 thesis at the University of Vienna, 'Krieg und Theater nach den Spielplänen Wiener Bühnen 1938–1944', sought to survey what had actually been produced in Viennese theatres during the seven theatrical seasons of Nazi rule. Since Vienna was the Reich's second city, and its principal theatres in the Third Reich were closely linked to the leading Berlin playhouses, Hager's thesis possessed wider resonance. Ilse Pitsch's 1952 doctoral dissertation at the University of Münster was even more ambitious in scope. It aimed to cover the entire institution of Nazi theatre. This was not simply a question of scholarly ambition, but of the thesis' conceptual approach. 'Das Theater als politisch-publizistisches Führungsmittel im Dritten Reich' was a characteristic product of its time. The title – as expressive in German as it is difficult to translate into English – gives a clear indication of Pitsch's thinking. Theatre (and its coverage in the press) was seen as a means of mass manipulation deployed by a totalitarian system, which was conceived in monolithic terms. The intellectual links with wider historical research on the Third Reich in the Cold War era are obvious, as are the shortcomings of that approach. The regime's propagandistic aims were identified mainly through the numerous Nazi pronouncements on theatre in public speeches and in print. Pitsch accepted these endlessly repeated platitudes at face value. Evidently it did not occur to her to ask whether the supposed aims had even been seriously attempted, never mind achieved. The notion of a monolithic Nazi party made her blind to the lively internal rivalries, which in turn prevented her from viewing the cultural discourses in the context of those rivalries. Pitsch merely noticed that the reality fell short of the wilder claims of Nazi activists.

This led her to conclude that theatre had somehow defied, by its very nature, the propagandists' manipulative intent. The German stage had thus supposedly seen off the brown-shirted barbarians.

If Pitsch's study has kept a place in the bibliographies, it is clearly not because its analysis still convinces; rather, it is its chronological proximity to the Third Reich that now interests. Pitsch's reflections were an honest attempt to make sense of the personal impressions of her generation when the smoke of battle had barely cleared. It was a former member of Nazi theatre's audience that spoke here, and some of her sweeping conclusions might almost be accorded the status of a primary source – on a par perhaps with the numerous post-war memoirs of German and Austrian theatre practitioners, with their characteristic mixture of shrewdly observed detail and (self-)exculpatory intent.

Pitsch's thesis remained the only systematic study of Nazi theatre for another ten years. Then, in the 1960s, as the winds of change began to blow through West Germany, three very different books appeared on the scene. The first was Joseph Wulf's *Theater und Film im Dritten Reich*,<sup>5</sup> a collection of documents relating to the theatre (and to film) in the Reich. These included extracts from some of the speeches, newspaper, and journal articles covered by Pitsch; but Wulf also included the kind of sources that Pitsch had not accessed (or been able to access), namely correspondence from various branches in the Nazi cultural bureaucracy. The book, one in a series of similar volumes on aspects of life in the Third Reich, proved popular and ran to several hard- and paperback editions in the ensuing decades. It was re-issued most recently in 1989, to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of its original publication. The brief introductions to the documents provided by Wulf and his biographical sketches of the major players were highly readable. Their derisive tone, moreover, captured the spirit of the altered times, just as Pitsch's soothing murmurings about eternal cultural values had done a decade earlier. That polemical tone, however, was also the central weakness of the book. Wulf, a descendent of a German-Jewish family, effectively took his revenge on his former persecutors by ex-

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5 Joseph Wulf, *Theater und Film im Dritten Reich: Eine Dokumentation* (Gütersloh: Sigbert Mohn, 1964).



posing them to ridicule. He found ample material. The trouble was that he had chosen it for effect. The snippets selected to create the overall picture of mediocrity (or, more often, of farcical incompetence) were authentic enough, but they represented less than the whole truth. The issue was not so much one of fairness, as one of credibility. Wulf's range of documents was conspicuously unable to explain why the Nazis could ever have been popular in Germany or why millions of Germans and Austrians should have continued to flock to the theatres throughout the years of the Third Reich. What is more, he failed to distinguish between the policies of individual Nazi paladins. This is all the more remarkable, since their internal disagreements must have been staring him in the face as he collated his material. His evident belief that one Nazi was as bad as another may be understandable in the light of his own personal experiences, but it marked an (anti-fascist) refusal to analyse that was, ironically enough, almost a mirror image of Pitsch's conservative contribution to the Adenauer restoration.

The view of a monolithic cultural bureaucracy in the Third Reich was powerfully challenged by two studies researched at either end of the 1960s. Neither book focused specifically on the theatre, but both ended up throwing substantial new light upon it. Hildegard Brenner's *Die Kunstpolitik des Nationalsozialismus* revealed Nazi cultural policy as vastly more varied and even contradictory than had previously been imagined.<sup>6</sup> Her findings, of course, were fully in line with the broader rethink of the Nazi dictatorship in the 1960s, with its new focus on competing agencies within the regime. The internal rivalry in cultural affairs was detailed at the end of that decade in Reinhart Bolmus' magisterial study of the Rosenberg faction within the Nazi party.<sup>7</sup> The title of Bolmus' book – *Das Amt Rosenberg und seine Gegner* (the Rosenberg Office and its Enemies) – revealed the extent of the change in historical conceptions that had occurred during the 1960s, for those enemies referred to in the title were not undaunted left-wing anti-fascists or principled Prussian Conservatives but fanatical National Socialists. They included, above all, Goebbels and the staff of the Propaganda Ministry itself.

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6 Hildegard Brenner, *Die Kunstpolitik des Nationalsozialismus* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1963).

7 Rainer Bolmus, *Das Amt Rosenberg und seine Gegner: Studien zum Machtkampf im nationalsozialistischen Herrschaftssystem* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1970).

Historians had thus transformed conceptions of the Nazi cultural administration; however, it was not their profession that first applied the new insights to the theatre. That was left to a group of *Germanisten* – in other words, literary critics. Here, too, a new generation had been urging a professional rethink by the 1960s.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps the most important of these new critical voices was Uwe-Karsten Ketelsen at Heidelberg. He was an early exponent of an interdisciplinary approach, with sharp antennae for historical as well as literary concerns. If ever the traditional German term for this discipline, *Literaturgeschichte* [literary history], was fully merited, it was here. In three major studies, beginning in the late sixties, Ketelsen investigated Nazi dramatic theory, then structural issues and recurring themes in Nazi drama, and finally its place within wider nationalist, far-right and National Socialist literature.<sup>9</sup> What to Pitsch had been a sudden imposition of ideology from outside the cultural sphere was revealed by Ketelsen to have had strong roots inside it.

The nexus of politics and culture in the Third Reich was to receive sustained attention in the 1970s. In part, that was the result of a new left-wing orthodoxy in much of the then rapidly expanding West German university sector; but crucially, the phenomenon also extended beyond the universities. It reflected the interests and predilections of a younger generation of Germans with few or no personal memories of the Third Reich. Here was Ranke's old notion of 'wie es eigentlich gewesen' (what it was really like), leavened with the tactics of 1960s generational warfare, for the intention of the (West) German *Achtundsechziger* to embarrass their parental generation – who had been young adults in the Nazi years – was never far from the surface. The *Bildungsbürgertum's* much cherished ideal of a supposedly apolitical culture transcending the petty squabbles of the day was now considered damning evidence in itself of the parental generation's evasions and *mauvaise foi*.

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8 The only (partial) exception before Ketelsen had been Dietrich Strothmann, *Nationalsozialistische Literaturpolitik: Ein Beitrag zur Publizistik im Dritten Reich: Abhandlungen zur Kunst-, Musik- und Literaturwissenschaft* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1960).

9 Uwe-Karsten Ketelsen, *Heroisches Theater: Untersuchungen zur Dramentheorie des Dritten Reiches* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1968); *Von heroischem Sein und völkischem Tod: Zur Dramatik des Dritten Reichs* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1970); *Völkisch-nationale und nationalsozialistische Literatur in Deutschland 1890–1945* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1976). See also Bruno Fischli's investigation into the roots of Nazi drama: *Die Deutschen Dämmerung: Zur Genealogie des völkisch-faschistischen Dramas und Theaters (1897–1933)* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1976).

However simplistic that retrospective view may have been, it did lead to a fresh look at German culture. There were major exhibitions on theatre and politics, such as the one in Heidelberg in 1974 on the *Thingspiel* (exactly four decades after the opening of the showpiece *Thing* arena on the town's outskirts) and the 1977 exhibition in (West) Berlin on stage and politics in the Weimar republic. These, in turn, provided the inspiration for similar efforts on a smaller scale in many West German towns and cities. The Berlin exhibition was a collaboration between the local authority in the district of Kreuzberg – the heart of the left-wing *autonome Szene* – and the department of theatre studies at the University of Cologne, one of the most respected in Germany. That joint effort resulted in a substantial catalogue, complete with critical apparatus and an assortment of topical essays.<sup>10</sup> Like the badly yellowing pages on which they were printed, the essays have not worn well: the clunking jargon of the *soixante-huitards* now seems very dated. The unappealing style is regrettable, since the richness of the sources and the numerous reproductions of important documents ensure that the volume is still worth consulting. Indeed some of the documents, detailing the rise of what the contributors insisted on calling 'fascist theatre' (in emulation of East German practice), usefully augmented Wulf's collection of a decade earlier. Bruno Fischli's article on the emergence of 'fascist' audiences in particular reminded people of a fact ignored by Wulf: that there had been people willing to watch right-wing offerings in German playhouses.

Amid such large collaborative ventures, there continued to be important individual efforts. In 1974 the veteran Frankfurt theatre critic Günther Rühle, one of the leading experts on the Weimar stage, rounded off his edition of seminal German plays of the early twentieth century with a volume about the years 1933–45.<sup>11</sup> For the first time in a generation, some of the main Nazi plays were readily available again to German readers and scholars. Rühle's selection included Hanns Johst's *Schlageter*, Heinrich Zerkaulen's *Langemarck*, Friedrich Bethge's *Marsch der Veteranen*, Erwin Guido Kolbenheyer's anti-Catholic *Gregor und Heinrich*, Eberhard Wolfgang Möller's

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10 Kunstamt Kreuzberg and Institut für Theaterwissenschaft der Universität Köln (eds), *Weimarer Republik* (Berlin: Elefanten, 1977).

11 Günther Rühle, *Zeit und Theater*, Vol. 3, *Diktatur und Exil: 1933–1945* (Berlin: Propyläen, 1974).

'Olympic play' *Das Frankfurter Würfelspiel*, and Hans Rehberg's *Der Siebenjährige Krieg*, which had once been one of Gründgens' greatest triumphs at the Preußische Staatstheater am Gendarmenmarkt. Rühle thus offered readers a good cross-section of the styles and themes prevalent in the Nazi years. Extensive commentaries at the end of the volume provided useful background information about playwrights whose names had largely dropped out of theatre handbooks and *Literaturgeschichten* after the war.

It was the only notable area of Nazi theatre not to have been included in Rühle's volume – the *Thingspiel* experiment in the early years of the Third Reich – that actually emerged as the principal focus of research in the 1970s. Klaus Vondung's doctoral thesis, published in 1971 as *Magie und Manipulation*, was the most controversial of these.<sup>12</sup> Vondung conceived National Socialism as a 'political religion'. The concept had been first introduced in the 1930s by the Austrian Erich Voegelin, and had been forcefully restated by his compatriot Friedrich Heer a year before Vondung embarked on his research. Vondung based his thesis on the many pronouncements of *Thingspiel* activists about 'cultic plays'. These he insisted on taking at face value. It is fair to say that he found few followers. (It was not until the 1990s that Vondung's ideas were taken up again.)<sup>13</sup>

Whilst there was clearly some strength in Vondung's underlying argument, there were too many contradictions in *Thingspiel* rhetoric – let alone practice – to allow the phenomenon to be reduced to a pseudo-religious exercise. Indeed, it is an apt reflection of the *Thingspiel*'s internal contradictions that the authors of another study published in the same year as Vondung's book should have felt able to approach the topic from an entirely different angle. In *Lorbeer und Palme* (The Palm and the Laurel) Klaus Sauer and Georg Werth sought to place Nazi mass theatre in the context of German 'patriotic festivals' through the ages.<sup>14</sup> This was, like Vondung's approach, an intriguing and potentially fruitful perspective. It promised, again as

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12 Klaus Vondung, *Magie und Manipulation: Ideologischer Kult und politische Religion des Nationalsozialismus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1971).

13 See Günther Berghaus, *Fascism and Theatre: Comparative Studies on the Aesthetics and Politics of Performance in Europe, 1925–1945* (Providence: Berghahn, 1996).

14 Klaus Sauer and Georg Werth, *Lorbeer und Palme: Patriotismus in deutschen Festspielen* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch-Verlag, 1971).

had Vondung's book, to marry theatre studies with social and political history. However, *Lorbeer und Palme* was undermined by two central flaws. One was conceptual. Sauer and Werth applied the term 'patriotism' indiscriminately across the centuries: the term was meant to fit equally well baroque apotheoses of absolute monarchs in Central Europe, the various *vaterländische Festspiele* of the nineteenth-century German *Bildungsbürgertum*, and the political spectacles of twentieth-century dictatorship. The second flaw of the study, linked with the first, was a degree of ideological myopia. Sauer and Werth either failed to spot or chose not to notice that the twentieth century had also produced left-wing dictatorships, one of them actually on German soil. What is more, there had been in inter-war Germany a mass theatre of the left. The failure to consider this weighed all the more heavily, since the *Thingspiel* had clearly built upon the Social Democrat and Communist mass theatre of the Weimar republic – a fact, moreover, indirectly acknowledged by the Nazis themselves.

A short but closely argued essay on the origins of the *Thingspiel* published in 1976 addressed these deficiencies and in the process transformed the debate. Egon Menz's 'Sprechchor und Aufmarsch' (Spoken choruses and mass rallies) highlighted the protean nature of the *Thingspiel* and its debt to right- and left-wing traditions.<sup>15</sup> The left-wing connection was explored in greater depth by Henning Eichberg in an article of that same year (and in a volume edited by him a year later).<sup>16</sup> Eichberg introduced both psychological and sociological concepts into what had been largely a debate among *Germanisten* and theatre specialists. As the subtitle of his substantial article of 1977 makes clear, he was concerned with patterns of political behaviour in the 1930s. Mass theatre he regarded as a recurring expression of such behaviour.<sup>17</sup> In this perspective, the *Thingspiel* was not simply a Nazi phenomenon. It was merely the Nazi *version* of something that also existed amongst the political left or as (suppos-

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15 Egon Menz, 'Sprechchor und Aufmarsch: Zur Entstehung des Thingspiels', in Horst Denkler and Karl Prüm (eds), *Die deutsche Literatur im Dritten Reich* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1976), pp. 330–46.

16 Henning Eichberg, 'Das nationalsozialistische Thingspiel', *Ästhetik und Kommunikation* 7, 26 (1976), pp. 60–9; Eichberg (ed.), *Massenspiele: NS-Thingspiel, Arbeiterweihespiel und olympisches Zeremoniell* (Stuttgart: Fromann-Holtzboog, 1977).

17 Henning Eichberg, 'Thing-, Fest- und Weihespiele in Nationalsozialismus, Arbeiterkultur und Olympismus: Zur Geschichte des politischen Verhaltens in der Epoche des Faschismus', in Eichberg (ed.), *Massenspiele*, pp. 19–180.

edly) apolitical spectacle in the mass ceremonies of the Olympic Games from Baron Coubertin to Goebbels. That was a persuasive interpretation; yet once again, limited knowledge of recent historiography blunted the analysis. Eichberg failed to site the *Thingspiel* in the context of the lively internal Nazi party rivalries of the mid-thirties.

The various strands of research on the *Thingspiel* that had emerged in the 1970s only came together in the following decade. Rainer Stommer's 1981 Ph.D. thesis submitted at the University of Bochum redefined the field. The titles of two articles resulting from his research, 'Thingplatz und Sprechchor im Dienste der Volksgemeinschaft' (Thing sites and spoken choruses in the service of the national community) and 'Thingstätten im Dritten Reich als Demonstration der Volksgemeinschaftsideologie' (Thing sites in the Third Reich as a demonstration of the ideology of national community) give a clear indication of his approach. Rather than focusing on the real or supposed cultic aspect, as Vondung had done, or on ill-defined notions of patriotism, as Sauer and Werth had attempted to do, Stommer highlighted the connections between the *Thingspiel* and wider Nazi rhetoric. The result was a lucid and detailed account of the *Thingspiel* movement. The revised version of Stommer's thesis, published in 1985 as *Die inszenierte Volksgemeinschaft* (the staged national community) remains the best account of the subject in German or indeed in any language.<sup>18</sup>

Thus it had taken almost forty years to arrive at a sophisticated analysis, which satisfied theatre specialists and historians alike. Yet this addressed just one specific form of Nazi theatre, and it covered only the early years of the regime. Ironically enough, a reminder of how long and arid the road had been came almost simultaneously from behind the Berlin Wall. Jutta Wardetzky's doctoral thesis, published in East Berlin in 1983, represented the first substantial East German contribution to the debate.<sup>19</sup> It seemed trapped in a time warp. *Theaterpolitik im faschistischen Deutschland* did offer Western readers something new, namely access to the surviving Propaganda Ministry files then preserved in the GDR. In many regards, however,

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18 Rainer Stommer, *Die inszenierte Volksgemeinschaft: Die Thingspielbewegung im Dritten Reich* (Marburg: Jonas, 1985).

19 Jutta Wardetzky, *Theaterpolitik im faschistischen Deutschland: Studien und Dokumente* (East Berlin: Henschel, 1983).

Wardetzky's book provided a strange throwback to the days of Ilse Pitsch and Adenauer's Germany. Pitsch had been relieved to conclude that true *Kultur*, being on an altogether higher plane than politics, would emerge unsullied from any dictatorship. Admittedly, Wardetzky took a different line on this. True to her socialist upbringing, she perceived a clear connection between culture and society; but she too believed *real* (in her case 'anti-fascist') German *Kultur* to have emerged unscathed – by dint of having survived in exile or through heroic resistance at home. Where the evidence suggested otherwise, as it had an awkward habit of doing, it was reinterpreted by both Pitsch and Wardetzky to fit the overall perspective. That was particularly obvious in the case of the *Thingspiel* – the most overtly political form of theatre in the Third Reich. Pitsch got around the problem by the simple expedient of refusing to regard it as proper theatre; for her it was mere propaganda. This sleight of hand kept her Conservative concept of culture intact (and allowed her to remain silent in deeply Catholic Münster about the *Thingspiel's* links with the inter-war revival of Catholic mystery plays). Wardetzky, meanwhile, had to ignore the *Thingspiel's* obvious affinities with the left-wing political culture of the Weimar republic, if the GDR's own historical roots were to remain pure. (The absence in GDR archives of any surviving documentation on the *Thingspiel* allowed her to do so without too much intellectual dishonesty.) Neither author had actually falsified the evidence, but both – consciously or not – ended up distorting the picture. Two academics at opposite ends of the political spectrum thus arrived at remarkably similar conclusions. In the process, both managed to explain away the uncomfortably large crowds which had flocked to the *Thingspiel*: most Germans, apparently, had simply been innocent victims of Nazi propaganda. The (self)-exculpatory approach which had progressively disappeared in West Germany in the 1960s survived in the 'anti-fascist' East well into the 1980s.

Still further to the east, such constraints did not exist. Poland did not have to create an artificial identity in the way its fraternal socialist neighbour west of the rivers Oder and Neisse did. Nor did Poles feel they had to prove something – as many West Germans did throughout the post-war decades. It was thus perhaps no accident that a Pole, rather than a German, should have been the first to attempt an

overall survey of theatre in the Third Reich. Bogusław Drewniak's book, which appeared in 1983 in a German translation as *Das Theater im NS-Staat*, was based on an impressively wide range of sources.<sup>20</sup> Drewniak had accessed material in both East and West German archives. As such, he was the first to quote extensively from Propaganda Ministry files. He also provided a wealth of detail on Nazi theatre in present-day Poland and the Czech Republic. This focus on the usually neglected eastern half of the Nazi empire remains the book's most enduring merit. On the debit side, the book was, in the words of one of its critics, 'written without so much as a thought being given to the issue of methods or methodologies'.<sup>21</sup> It also shared with Wardetzky's study a simplistic and outdated view of Nazi propaganda. This may (or may not) be due at least in part to the circumstances in which both books were written. Whether Drewniak's naïvely garrulous style was simply an intellectual shortcoming or the cunning of a man forced to work in a dictatorial environment is almost impossible to say. It did have one consequence, however: it finally provoked a West German historian into turning his attention to Nazi theatre.

Konrad Dussel, a history student at Heidelberg, devoted his doctoral thesis to the subject. Clearly, in the light of the criticism directed against Drewniak's approach, the methodology of the exercise had to be carefully considered. Dussel decided to favour depth over breadth: he focused on just five theatres with resident repertoire companies. There was an echo in such limitation of the very first post-war thesis on Nazi theatre. Yet, whereas Alfred Hager had examined a metropolis, Dussel chose provincial towns: Bielefeld, Coburg, Dortmund, Ingolstadt and Karlsruhe. The five were chosen to provide a balance between ancient theatres and more recent ones, between former court theatres and municipal institutions, between industrial and traditional market towns, between North and South, and Catholic and Protestant Germany. Even electoral issues had been considered. The list included a bastion of Social Democracy (Dortmund), a redoubt of Bavarian Conservatism (Ingolstadt), and an early Nazi stronghold (Coburg). There were practical considerations as well. For

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20 Bogusław Drewniak, *Das Theater im NS-Staat: Szenarium deutscher Zeitgeschichte 1933–1945* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1983).



all five theatres chosen, substantial local and regional documentation had survived Allied bombing. All five also lay inside the borders of the Federal Republic, which no doubt made access to the sources easier for Dussel. Overall, it was a clever and sophisticated approach; and whilst it was not perfect – the centre and the east of the Reich were conspicuously absent in the geographical range – it provided an effective study of provincial theatre. Dussel showed convincingly that even in the Third Reich theatre operated under commercial constraints, thus providing a corrective to the idea that German playhouses had been simply local branches of the Propaganda Ministry *and* to the rival notion of playhouses functioning under the Nazis as *Musentempel* of vestal purity. A follow-up to Dussel's work with a broader perspective was clearly a desideratum, but – to this day – it has never come from the ranks of German historians.<sup>22</sup>

Two historians who did turn to Nazi theatre in the 1990s, Alan Steinweis and Oliver Rathkolb, approached the topic in the context of wider Nazi culture, much as Brenner and Bolmus had done three decades earlier. Steinweis' *Art, Ideology and Commerce: The Reich Chambers of Music, Theater and the Visual Arts* examined the administrative apparatus of Nazi cultural policy.<sup>23</sup> The study detailed both the Propaganda Ministry's repressive measures and its attempts to win over cultural activists through generous financial support. This substantial carrot (rather than the more familiar stick) also interested Oliver Rathkolb. His focus was on the relationship between the regime and the artistic elites, particularly conductors, opera singers, and actors of stage and screen. The title of Rathkolb's book was deliberately provocative. *Führertreu und gottbegnadet* (Loyal to the Führer and Divinely Talented) was a reference to the lists of 'divinely talented' artists drawn up in the final months of the war

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21 See the uncharacteristically waspish footnote in Konrad Dussel, *Ein neues, ein heroisches Theater: Nationalsozialistische Theaterpolitik und ihre Auswirkungen* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1988), p. 10.

22 The only attempt at an overall account was a chatty (and catty) book for a mass readership: Helmut Daiber, *Schaufenster der Diktatur: Theater im Machtbereich Hitlers* (Stuttgart: Neske, 1995). Dussel himself was content to refine his arguments in a number of elegant if brief articles. See especially, 'Provinztheater in der NS-Zeit', *Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 38 (1990), pp. 75–111.

23 Alan Steinweis, *Art, Ideology and Commerce: The Reich Chambers of Music, Theater and the Visual Arts* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina Press, 1993).

at Hitler's behest under that very heading.<sup>24</sup> The Führer regarded the survival of the 'divinely talented' as paramount to the future existence of the German nation. And survive they did. It was their prominent post-war careers that gave *Führertreu und gottbegnadet* added impact in the 1990s. That was particularly true in Rathkolb's native Austria, for among the artistic elite, as in other areas of public life, the Austrian contribution to the Third Reich had been disproportionately large. In this regard, Rathkolb's book was clearly connected with Austrian soul-searching in the Waldheim years. Indeed, it cannot be separated from parallel efforts on the stage itself. Prominent Austrian dramatists, like Thomas Bernhard or the Nobel laureate Elfriede Jelinek, had not merely highlighted Austrian involvement in the Third Reich, but had focused attention on the complicity of many of Austria's greatest actors. It was only as a result of all this that the *grande dame* of the Vienna Burgtheater, Paula Wessely, finally ended her long silence about the Nazi years. Wessely's belated public contribution was a perfect illustration of the long-denied link between theatre and politics, and it provided a vindication for historical research on the Nazi stage.

At the end of the twentieth century, such research still remained a patchy affair overall. The existing literature either focused on particular aspects of Nazi theatre, or was of distinctly uneven quality. Two collections of essays published in the mid-nineties, *Fascism and Theatre*, edited by Günter Berghaus and *Theatre in the Third Reich, the Prewar Years*, edited by Glen Gadberry, illustrated the point.<sup>25</sup> The Berghaus collection offered contributions of the highest quality. Yet its pan-European perspective meant that only parts of the book specifically addressed the topic of Nazi theatre. Those essays that did so, moreover, had little that connected them. Barbara Panse's article on censorship (a summary of her earlier *Habilitationsschrift*), Bettina Schlüter's piece on the municipal theatre in Frankfurt (summarising her doctoral research), and Berghaus' own reprise of the Vondung thesis on the *Thingspiel* made for an eclectic mix. It introduced aspects of German research to readers with no German, but otherwise merely highlighted the fact that the topic was much vaster than the coverage offered in the volume. The collection edited by Glen Gadberry provided

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24 Oliver Rathkolb, *Führertreu und gottbegnadet: Künstlereliten im Dritten Reich* (Vienna: Österreichischer Bundesverlag, 1993).

25 Berghaus (ed.), *Fascism*; Gadberry (ed.), *Theatre*.

greater breadth; but it was achieved only with some apparent effort. Whilst the contributions by familiar names – Michael Patterson or Gadberry himself – were effective, other offerings were less convincing. One of the articles, for instance, debated at length the question of whether the dramatist Sigmund Graff had worked in the Propaganda Ministry or not. A brief enquiry at the Bundesarchiv, or the merest glance at Graff's published autobiography *Von S.M. zu N.S.* might have put an end to the speculation.<sup>26</sup>

In his introduction, Gadberry spoke of the dearth of scholarly work on Nazi theatre. The same diagnosis led to a renewed effort in Germany itself in the latter part of the twentieth century. The department of *Theaterwissenschaften* at (West) Berlin's Freie Universität produced a steady stream of MA dissertations and doctoral theses on Nazi theatre throughout the 1980s. Indeed, the Freie Universität all but dominated research in this area. (Only the University of Vienna provided credible competition.) Most of these dissertations and theses examined one of the two hundred-odd German repertoire theatres during the Nazi years. It seemed logical to collate that body of research and condense it into a single study. The result was *Theater im 'Dritten Reich'* – a massive tome, edited by one of the central figures of post-war German theatre studies, Henning Rischbieter.<sup>27</sup>

*Theater im 'Dritten Reich'* consisted of three distinct parts: an overall account of Nazi theatre policy from Rischbieter's own pen; an overview of Nazi theatre repertoire by Rischbieter's pupil Thomas Eicher, based on the latter's thesis; and a survey of Nazi dramatic literature by Barbara Panse, which was a revised version of her earlier *Habilitationsschrift*.<sup>28</sup> Inevitably, the volume had a somewhat 'bitty' feel. Indeed, the individual contributions were themselves 'bitty'. Rischbieter had decided to cover each theatre in a separate mini essay; Eicher and Panse did the same for individual dramatists. The result was more of a handbook than a coherent study. As with

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26 Sigmund Graff, *Von S.M. zu N.S.: Erinnerungen eines Bühnenauteurs* (Munich: Welsermühl, 1963).

27 Henning Rischbieter, *Theater im 'Dritten Reich': Theaterpolitik, Spielplanstruktur, NS-Dramatik* (Seelze-Velber: Kallmeyer, 2000).

28 Barbara Panse, 'Autoren, Themen und Zensurpraxis: zeitgenössische deutschsprachige Dramatik im Theater des Dritten Reichs', unpublished Ph.D., Freie Universität Berlin, 1993.

many such exercises, the constituent parts were not all of the same quality. The best bits, however, were very good indeed. Rischbieter's account of the Nazi administrative takeover, for instance, was a model of conciseness. The catalogue of individual theatres, on the other hand, was neither concise nor really comprehensive. In that regard, the massive tome even compared unfavourably with Drewniak's much slimmer impressionist effort twenty years earlier. Moreover, the decision to distinguish neatly between German and annexed territories and to range the respective theatres accordingly, dictated perhaps by present-day German political correctness, was not ideal: it failed to reflect the political reality at the time – to say nothing of the specific Nazi aim of blurring that distinction. The volume also had surprisingly little to say on wartime theatre for the armed forces both inside the Reich's borders and in occupied Europe. Given the scale of the *Fronttheater* operation, that was a noticeable omission – all the more so, given the vast size of Rischbieter's volume. In short, *Theater im Dritten Reich* is an important and helpful resource but, for the historian at least, it cannot be the final word on the subject.

The same verdict ultimately goes for *Theatre under the Nazis*, which coincided with the Rischbieter tome.<sup>29</sup> This is the most ambitious collection of essays to have been published to date in English. In fact it was, as its blurb rightly emphasised, 'the first book to appear in English about theatre from the entire Nazi period'. Whilst that cleverly chosen phrase made no claims that the book actually *covered* theatre from the entire Nazi period, the volume did have much to offer. It provided an effective introduction by John London; an essay on the *Thingspiel* by William Niven, enlarging on his earlier piece in *German Life and Letters*;<sup>30</sup> Glen Gadberry (who had first made his name with research on the *Thingspiel* himself) contributed an article on Nazi history plays;<sup>31</sup> in a nod to *Musiktheater* in provincial playhouses, Erik Levi summarised his research on opera in the Nazi period; Rebecca Rovit reprised her piece on theatre

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

30 William Niven, 'Apocalyptic Elements in National Socialist *Thingspiele* and in Drama of the Weimar Republic', *German Life and Letters* 48 (1995), pp. 170–83.

31 Glen Gadberry, 'E.W. Möller and the National Drama of Nazi Germany: a Study of the *Thingspiel* and Möller's *Das Frankfurter Würfelspiel*', unpublished Ph.D., University of

performances under the aegis the Jüdischer Kulturbund which had appeared in the Gadberry volume four years earlier; London drew on his expertise in Spanish theatre to provide an overview of the non-German theatre repertoire in the Third Reich; William Abbey and Katherina Havekamp contributed a jointly written essay about the wartime German theatre at Lille in occupied Northern France.

Six decades on from the fall of the Third Reich then, the overall picture of research on Nazi theatre continues to be a remarkably fragmented one. There are a substantial number of studies of varying length and sophistication on individual theatrical institutions.<sup>32</sup> There are theses on directorial aspects or presentational minutiae, such as differing styles of theatre programmes. There are scrupulously researched accounts of aspects or specific genres of Nazi theatre – the most recent example being an American study of comedies in the Third Reich with the slightly improbable title *Hitler Laughing*<sup>33</sup> – and there are a handful of collections offering a mosaic approach to the topic.

Most of the existing literature is in German. Research in English continues to be in very short supply. Except for my own recent book *The Swastika and the Stage*, there exists no overall account to date of Nazi theatre. There have been only a handful of doctoral theses or MA dissertations in Britain and America, and there are perhaps little more than a dozen really substantive essays on individual aspects of this vast topic. Thus, Glen Gadberry's comment of a decade ago continues to stand. Indeed, unintentional corroboration came in the form of a volume on American research into Twentieth-Century German Theatre published in 2004. Five out of the seven essays covering Nazi theatre in that collection were from the same pen: Gadberry's own.<sup>34</sup> Clearly, more research is needed by historians, theatre specialists, and

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Wisconsin, 1972; 'Eberhard Wolfgang Möller's *Das Frankfurter Würfelspiel*', in Eichberg (ed.), *Massenspiele*, pp. 235–51.

32 The first major example of this kind of research in English is Elizabeth Schulz Hostetter, *The Berlin State Theater under the Nazi Regime* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2004). See also the comparative study on the Bielefeld theatre (in Westphalia) and the theatre in York: Anselm Heinrich, *Entertainment, Propaganda, Education: Regional Theatre in Germany and Britain between 1918 and 1945* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2007).

33 William Grange, *Hitler Laughing: Comedy in the Third Reich* (Lanham, MA: University Press of America, 2006).

34 Helmut Rennert (ed.), *Essays on Twentieth Century German Drama and Theater: An American Reception 1977–1999* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004).

literary critics alike. In the crowded field of Nazi studies, the theatre still offers much that is unexplored.

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