

Theodor Fontane on Changing Public Tastes in the Theater (1878–89)

Abstract

Theodor Fontane (1819–1898) is widely regarded as the most important German-language realist writer of the nineteenth century. Before he started writing novels, he was the drama critic for the liberal *Vossische Zeitung* during the 1870s and 1880s. In this role, Fontane became very familiar with theater productions in Berlin. The following excerpts are from letters Fontane sent either to his son or to Friedrich Stephany, editor of the *Vossische Zeitung*, from 1878 to 1889. Fontane complains about the overwrought but boring emotionalism of many dramas of his time—that is, until Naturalism began to make its mark on German drama and found his approval. Fontane defends Henrik Ibsen (1828–1906), the Norwegian writer and dramatist best known for his plays *Peer Gynt* (1876), *Nora* (1879), and *Ghosts* (1881). He also expresses admiration for Gerhart Hauptmann (1862–1946), whose Naturalist drama *Before Daybreak* [*Vor Sonnenaufgang*] scandalized Berlin audiences in late 1889. Fontane reacts by mocking both the audience itself and the theater critics who were so outraged by this new dramatic style.

Source

I. Fontane's Commentary on August Wilhelm Iffland's *Die Jäger* [*The Hunters*] (January 30, 1878)

Fontane was annoyed by the public's enthusiasm for the revival of August Wilhelm Iffland's moralizing play Die Jäger [The Hunters] from 1873. In a review of the performance of January 30, 1878, he wrote:

[...] The tone that sounds throughout the entire play is one of sentimentality. This was the tone of the decades in which the play originated, and that explains the great impact it had in its time; but that time is long past, and just as surely as we have left behind the witch trials of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, we have certainly moved beyond the sentimentalities of the eighteenth century. [...] We have either advanced a great deal or fallen greatly behind, and either is an advantage. Only the philistine, with his eternal tendency to fall between two stools, will get his money's worth from this play. For as good as it is in its way, it has certainly become outdated. [...]

II. Fontane's Commentary on Ibsen's *Gespenster* [*Ghosts*] (1889)

*Fontane greeted the founding of the theater company Freie Bühne [Free Stage] and its epochal first season, which saw the production of Henrik Ibsen's *Gespenster* [Ghosts] and Gerhard Hauptmann's *Vor Sonnenaufgang* [Before Daybreak], among other dramas. After the premiere of *Ghosts* on September 29, 1889, Fontane wrote:*

Yesterday, the theater company "Freie Bühne" opened a series of eight plays scheduled for this winter on the stage of the Lessing Theater. It did so with a production of Ibsen's *Ghosts*, a choice that seemed correct to me in two respects: first, as a tribute to Ibsen, who (at least in terms of the dramatic arts) is the oldest representative and head of the new realistic school; and second, out of appropriate prudence. *Ghosts* had already been performed at the royal theater one morning two or three years ago. Back then, it was directed by Anno and achieved great success, even though this success was strongly contested by opponents of the school. [...]

Enough about the performance though. Might a few words also be said about the play itself? There is already a whole body of literature on Ibsen, and particularly on the content of *Ghosts*. It was inevitable that a heated controversy would be sparked by the lesson contained within it—that the sins of the father will be visited upon the children—and by the idea that hereditary disease in its most dreadful manifestation is the constant companion of original sin. I am all the more reluctant to rejoin this debate, because I would only be able to repeat what I have said before. Where would we be if the law had been in effect from the very beginning? Waiting for the freezing-over point would not have been necessary, since we would have been ruined by “moral decline” a long time before then. Moreover, if Ibsen’s play nevertheless had a great impact again yesterday, the reason must be something else. [...] In the quarrel with the realistic school, critics nowadays frequently point to the writings of a previous literary epoch, to a golden age, one that, while stressing the ideal, was capable of creating greater things and making people far happier. The question remains whether this is true. *If* it is true, however, then it is equally true that these great creations—which are even regarded as such by the advocates of the opposing trend—have basically stopped sparking lively interest among the humanity “whose turn it is now.” Performances of classic plays have functioned as the pendant to empty churches for some time now. The pomp accompanying performances is a sad stop-gap measure. And in this desperation, realism came into being, seeking artistic salvation in the opposite direction. If it could no longer be paradise, it was going to be a garden of life instead. On the path toward this destination, there were many places where people stopped, though it might have been better just to pass by. In the end, though, after many an odyssey, I am convinced that beauty will be found on this path, and once it is, it will find a sharper portrayal because the eye will have learned to see more keenly in the meantime. [...]

The next performance (October 20) will bring us Gerhart Hauptmann’s socio-critical drama *Vor Sonnenaufgang* (*Before Daybreak*). May the staging of this second play have an equally promising start, something that will surely be the case if the artists and theater directors continue to support the cause of the “Freie Bühne” as they have done in the past! This might be rather difficult under the circumstances. But the extraordinary interest with which the audience—incidentally, I could not imagine a better or more understanding audience—followed yesterday’s performance must also be an incentive for supporters of the project to overcome all of their difficulties with delight.

III. To Friedrich Stephany (October 10, 1889)

Berlin, October 10, 1889

[...] And now Gerhart Hauptmann, the new robber in chief, next to whom Ibsen is a mere cadet. [...] There is something in these new plays that the old ones did not have, something that leaves them relatively impoverished and often seemingly dead. Realism is understood entirely falsely if one assumes that it is wed to ugliness once and for all; it will only be totally authentic when, conversely, it has been wed to beauty and has transfigured its accompanying ugliness, which is simply part of life. [...]

IV. To his Son Theodor Fontane

Berlin, October 19, 1889.

My dear old Theo,

I have not written since last summer, and when I gaze over the intervening period, I see before me the “primeval land of German victories” (these were Albedyll’s words, more or less). Divisions here and there, camps, supply columns and bakeries, and in between, on horseback, a rider on a white horse, who, still lit up by the joy of having seen his Kaiser, bursts into the semi-revolutionary gang of bakers and restores obedience, and with obedience [restores] that upon which everything depends: bread. Knesebeck, the later field marshal, made his career by having the courage during the Rhine campaign to use a bread transport he was leading to fill a ditch that his artillery could not cross. Perhaps this bread will be a

source of luck for you—all the more since you did not sacrifice it (which will always be unfortunate) but instead created it. By the way, that whole incident—and there are many similar ones—has shown me once again just how shaky everything is and how much we are in need of luck and victories to overcome the dangers emerging from all sides, and in our camp at that. Everything and everyone is wrong-headedly democratized, Guelph-ified, Catholicized, or just generally disgruntled and annoyed, and obeys only because everyone’s mind imagines cannons being brought out to close the circle and fire grape-shot inwards. One day, however, even *those* who can be counted on to close the circle will not be there anymore, and then it will all be over. You do not have to be a prophet of doom to see such times ahead, and I have only this consolation in my soul: Things always turn out differently in the end. Just as Louis Schneider once compiled newspaper clippings from the period 1780–1870 to prove “that it was said every year that the theater had never been as bad,” you could make a list of quotations to prove that the word every year was that “next year, the world is going to end, or at least come very close to it.” Some sinful tide, or even the Flood itself, is always imminent, and yet people continue to live happily and bake their wedding cakes.

Friedel is partaking in one of these wedding cakes; the sister of his friend E. got married this afternoon, and of course your Mama was at the wedding service. Such couples always get married in the Jerusalem Church, and the marriage address commenced with the words: “It is a bold and heroic step you are about to make...” True enough, but unusual.

We are leading a very restless lifestyle, especially I: social gatherings, visitors from out of town, and above all else, a lot of theater. This includes performances at the so-called “Freie Bühne,” which is managed by little *Brahm*. Another play is on the schedule tomorrow, at lunchtime from 12 to 2 o’clock, a quintessential realist drama, which will generate raging disputes in its wake; I will be there as a standard-bearer for the *Neue Preußische Zeitung*. Incredible, the things one lives to see.

As always, your old Papa.

V. To Friedrich Stephany (October 22, 1889)

Shortly after attending the premiere of Hauptmann’s Before Daybreak on October 20, 1889, and immediately after writing his two-part review, Fontane reflected on Ibsen’s and Hauptmann’s contribution to German drama in letters to Friedrich Stephany, his editor at the Vossische Zeitung. It was nonsense, Fontane believed, to say that Hauptmann lacked real talent, as many Berlin theater critics were claiming.

Berlin, October 22, 1889

Most esteemed gentleman and friend.

Yesterday evening, after I had turned in the second half of my review, I allowed myself the pleasure of buying all the evening papers at a newsstand, so that I could go home and immerse myself in the opinions of my colleagues. It was very enjoyable indeed; and there is still just enough of the “old Berliner” (from the 1830s) in my veins to be amused by good jokes, even if I have to dismiss them. And so I had to laugh heartily about Lindau and Landau and the stranger in the *Kleine Journal*, [...]. But—and this is why I am writing—all of these reviews [...] are rantings and jokes, some of them very good as the latter. In terms of their essence, however, they are superficial and malicious, written either without any real understanding of culture or with the suppression of all better judgment. It is ridiculous to fob off this young fellow (Hauptmann) by evoking the common phrase that he also has a bit of talent. That means nothing at all; everyone has “a bit of talent,” one can say that of about every third person. Hauptmann, though, has a very great and rare talent, but above all, and this is something I have to emphasize time and again—and am *entitled* to emphasize, because I really know more about the things under review here—above all, his play is the expression of a stupendous degree of *art*, judgment, and insight into everything that belongs to the technique and structure of drama. It may be that he got lucky just once

and went with it; that is possible but not very likely. Do overcome, if possible, your personal aversion to the school (I certainly respect your feelings), but let me, as an “old sober-sides,” express my unwavering conviction that there is more behind a man who can write such a work than behind the whole lot of those who only hanker after “author’s royalties.”

Your Th. F.

VI. Fontane’s Commentary on Hauptmann’s *Vor Sonnenaufgang* [Before Daybreak] (1889)

Fontane’s review of Hauptmann’s Before Daybreak provides a useful synopsis, but it also indicates how the style and content of Naturalist theater broke cultural conventions in ways that met with Fontane’s approval.

I

It is never very easy (at least this is my view of the matter) to come up with a review, and sometimes it is difficult. Yesterday presented such a case. Only he who has the courage to loathe this work vigorously, piously, merrily, and freely, or to flatly praise it to the heavens, will be spared the experience of racking his brains over this social drama by Gerhart Hauptmann; but anyone who lacks that courage, who feels that every new scene presents him with new questions, will recognize the difficulty of answering all of those questions and will face a difficult day of writing.

[...]

This is a strange, spine-chilling story. All over our country, we now have regions where farmers, and sometimes mere cottagers, have become rich overnight, and the play takes us to one such place. It is a Silesian village on the edge of the mountains, and the house we enter not only has citified wallpaper and paintings on the walls; it is also equipped with electric bells and a telephone. The latter is even used in the play. The house, at least the “elegant” part, is home to five persons, four of whom comprise the old line: the farmer Krause, his much younger second wife, and his two daughters from a first marriage. The elder daughter is already married to the engineer Hoffmann, who is now the fifth person in the house, but actually the first in terms of status. He has taken over all business matters, and has used fraudulent tactics to increase the fortune that he originally came upon; at the same time, though, he has seen to the modernization of the house. Yes, indeed, bells and a telephone can be found there, a horse and carriage as well, even an “Eduard,” a liveried servant from Berlin. This house poses as elegant, but in reality it is actually a horrible house, one with a specter in every corner. A drunkard of the first degree, the old farmer practically lives at the pub; his second wife, a former stable maid or not much more, pretends to be a “fine lady” when it suits her; the older daughter, married to the engineer Hoffman, has inherited her father’s addiction to booze; and her husband, Hoffmann, the director of the house, is a phrasemonger and thoughtless hedonist who cares only about himself and subordinates *everything* to his own enjoyment. Before this schnapps- and sin-ridden clan is introduced to us in full, we make the acquaintance of Alfred Loth, a former schoolmate and fellow student of the engineer Hoffmann. Alfred Loth came to this place to study the workers’ question, especially the situation of coal miners, up close and in person. He is an idealistic politician with a touch of Social Democracy about him, and he makes a living writing articles and books; he is a decent fellow, a bit obsessed, a steadfast doctrinarian and stickler for principles, but definitely honest and reliable. Among his principles, the struggle against alcoholism takes priority. He is one of those people who, by virtue of their own strength, aspire to create a better sort of human being, in order to take this healthier race as the departure point for finding bliss for humanity. So this Alfred Loth, replete with ambitions to elevate humanity, a man whom we might briefly characterize as a fanatical teetotaler, is stuck in a den of schnapps. Keen observation does not seem to be his strong suit; he notices nothing. Perhaps this is the case because, as doctrinarians often

do, he immediately becomes interested in the younger daughter Helene. And she reciprocates this interest. Incidentally, the situation of this Helene is different from that of the other occupants of the house. Years ago, her deceased mother's last will had taken her, for educational purposes, to Herrnhut^[1]; and for her, Alfred Loth's entry into her father's house was like reconnecting to those times when she still actually saw and heard humans. With every passing moment, she becomes more and more convinced that she can only be rescued from the quagmire in which she is stuck by this simple man who has come to her home by divine providence, this man who does not dazzle and captivate, but who is honest and has principles. And, best of all, this man who loves her. There is no festive engagement, but they *are* engaged, and Helene counts the hours until she will be set free and introduced to different circumstances—if necessary, by means of escape. At this point, for better or worse, fate leads the physician of the mountain village, one Dr. Schimmelpfennig, to the house. Loth recognizes him, just as he had recognized Hoffmann the day before, as an old comrade from his fraternity days, a comrade, however, who has remained faithful to past principles. In a wonderful scene (in dramatic terms, the play's most important), the pessimistic Schimmelpfennig, who, like Loth, subscribes to ideals, paints a picture of the Krauses' home and family while his friend listens with horrified attention. Loth finds himself confronted with the choice of either breaking his principles or his promise of love. He chooses the latter, writes a short note, and leaves the house. A few minutes later, Helene, gripped with terrible premonitions, looks for him but finds nothing but his words of farewell. In desperation and without a moment's hesitation, she tears the hunting knife from the wall and rushes into the adjacent room. Immediately thereafter, a maid comes in to deliver a message to Helene, and when the maid finally enters the adjacent room in search of Helene, she rushes out again with a cry of horror, and the desolate house reverberates with the news of the bloody event. The stage remains empty as the curtain falls.

This is the plot of the play, which I believe to have described accurately in this outline, at least in terms of its essence and character. What I cannot describe, however, is the *tone* in which the entire thing is presented, because it is impossible to do so. And this is the reason why any account of it will always be imperfect and also damaging most of the time. With respect to works like this, which are a lot like ballads, the tone is virtually everything, since it is equal to the question of truth or untruth. If it captures me, if it is so powerful that it allows me to overlook weaknesses or imperfections, even the odd ridiculousness, then a poet has spoken to me, a real poet who cannot exist without purity of perception, and who expresses this best by acknowledging realities and at the same time giving them their proper *name*. If this effect is missing, if the tone fails to exercise its sanctifying, saving power, if it does not transfigure the ugly, then the writer has lost the gamble, either because his motivations were not pure enough yet and the lie, or at least the empty phrase, was lodged in his heart, or because his powers left him in the lurch and let him commence his work at an ill-fated moment. If the latter is the case, then he will do better next time, but if the former applies, he would do better to turn to "other spheres of pure activity." Gerhart Hauptmann, though, may hold his ground in his chosen field, and he *will* hold his ground, for he has not only the right tone but also the right courage and, along with the right courage, the right *art*. In instances of Naturalist coarseness, it is foolish to suspect a lack of art all the time. On the contrary, when applied properly (this, however, will be subject to debate), these instances offer proof of the highest art.

Those were my approximate reflections as I *read* Gerhart Hauptmann's play. He simply appeared to me as the fulfillment of Ibsen. Everything I had admired about Ibsen for years, that "reach into the fullness of human life," the novelty and boldness of the problems addressed, the artful simplicity of language, the gift for characterization, and, at the same time, the most consistent realization of the plot and the removal of everything extraneous to the subject matter—all of that I found again in Hauptmann. And everything that I have fought in Ibsen for years—the crackpot ideas, the hairsplitting, the striving to continue sharpening the pointed statement until that point finally breaks, additionally, that tendency to get lost in vagueness, the prophecy-making, and the speaking in riddles, riddles that no one wished to solve because they had long become boring. None of these flaws did I find in Gerhart Hauptmann. Here is

no realist who occasionally ails from philosophical-romantic quirks, but a refined realist, that is, one who remains the same from beginning to end.

This was my attitude toward the young writer and his play, and thus prepared and immune (as I thought), I went to the theater yesterday. And in fact, I remained unshaken in my fundamental beliefs, though on the other hand I cannot deny that, when performed, the play had a very different impact than when read. It was by no means weaker, but it was entirely different. [...] The audience, depending on the nature of their partisanship, voiced rather intense approval or disapproval, partaking in either an assenting or a mocking laughter, and also in one of those critical impromptus at which Berliners are known to excel. [...] The audience got to see a hopeless drunk and a few imbeciles. By a stronger emphasis on the elements of brutality that the poet, in complete artistic awareness, prescribed here, this non-effect could have certainly been translated into a strong effect; in retrospect, however, I am absolutely certain that this would not have helped the spine-chilling effect get off the ground, but would have simply put a revolting aspect (with perhaps very questionable consequences for the outcome of the play) in the place of a prosaically indifferent one. Thus, the producers and stage directors chose the lesser of two evils. As a result of this performance, however, I took the following insight home with me: namely, that Realism, even the most artistically refined kind, is still subject to certain stage rules when it leaves the book and enters the theatre, and that the features of actual life, which are a credit to the realist novel even if they are ugly, appear prosaic on stage if one cuts off the locks of their strength, or repellent if one leaves to them their authenticity. [...]

II

[...]

Many an argument will still emerge from Hauptmann's drama and many a long-standing friendship will enter into dangerous waters. One thing, however, that *cannot* possibly be subject to argument concerns the writer himself and the impression made by his appearance. Instead of a bearded, suntanned, and broad-shouldered man with a *Klapphut* and a *Jägerschem Klapprock*^[2], there appeared a slender, lanky young man with blond hair; he wore an impeccably cut suit and displayed impeccable manners, and bowed with a gracious modesty that was probably irresistible even to most of his opponents. Some of them will certainly find new weapons in his appearance by passing it off as diabolical deception, remembering fondly that the deceased Medical Privy Councilor Casper began his famous book on his experiences as a district doctor and forensic pathologist with the words, "All of my murderers looked like young girls."

NOTES

[1] The first settlement of the Moravian Brethren—trans.

[2] A hat and coat belonging to a collection of "normal clothing" designed by Gustav Jäger (1832–1917), who used only undyed and natural fibers—trans.

Source of English translations: Part I: adapted from Gordon A. Craig, *Theodor Fontane. Literature and History in the Bismarck Reich*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 140–42; Parts II–VI were translated by Erwin Fink.

Source of original German texts: Part I (on Iffland): Theodor Fontane, *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 22, *Causerien über Theater*, edited by Edgar Gross. Munich: Nymphenburger Verlagshandlung, 1964, p. 636; Part II (on Ibsen): Theodor Fontane, *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 22, pp. 705–09; Parts III–V (letter to Friedrich Stephany; letter to his son; letter to Friedrich Stephany): Theodor Fontane, *Werke*,

Schriften und Briefe, edited by Walter Keitel and Helmuth Nürnberger, twenty-one volumes in four sections, section IV, *Briefe*, vol. 3, 1879–1889. Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1980, pp. 728–32; Part VI (on Hauptmann): Theodor Fontane, *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 22, pp. 710–18.

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