Ernst Dronke on Popular Theater, Bourgeois Theater, and Court Theater in Berlin (1846)

Abstract

In his book *Berlin* (1846), the writer and socialist Ernst Dronke (1822–1891) offers a critical view of contemporary theater in the Prussian capital. According to his observations, popular theater and the royal theater were too similar. Dronke expressed disappointment that the so-called elite theater of Berlin did not live up to high cultural and artistic standards and actually lagged behind other major German theaters for years.

Source

Let's turn our attention once more to Berlin's theaters. The Königstadt Theater, created as an institution for "the people," should receive first mention. This institution was founded to furnish the outlying suburban area [of Königstadt] with a more convenient and less expensive opportunity to enjoy theater. The Königstadt Theater's charter restricted it to one mission: to serve "the people," the uneducated masses. The new theater was not permitted to perform tragedies; its repertoire was limited so that it would not compete with other theaters. Whereas the Royal Theater [königliche Bühne] performed great operas, serious dramas, and high comedies, the domain of the Königstadt Theater was vaudeville, popular comedies, and melodrama. As a result of this division, the task of the Königstadt Theater was to continuously produce novelties, gags, and other light fare. The directors speculated—it could not be otherwise—that the middlebrows, the *petit bourgeois*, would fill the cash register. An audience consists of a first tier, a second tier, and the orchestra seats. Thus, despite all of the populist pretensions, a people's theater was out of the question under these conditions. Because of money, a theater must orient itself to the desires and wishes of the public. It cannot seek to improve them because it is not above their taste, but rather financially dependent upon it. This influence is all the more significant because it has an effect on the dramatic products. What playwright would want to have an impact on the masses if his work can only be performed when it conforms to public taste? At first, the Königstadt Theater appeared to want to hold on to a "popular" [*volkstümliches*] element, but the realities of theater today, which require deference to the wishes of the various ranks of spectators, destroy the populist ideal. At that time, the Viennese were performing some dramatic works by Raimund, which undeniably engaged and uplifted the popular spirit [*Volksgeist*] in an accessible way. *Der Bauer als Millionär* [*The Millionaire Peasant*], *Der Alpenkönig* [*King of the Alps*], and other plays had a deeper conception than the typical farces, which were linked to the interests of the day. But soon these more serious attempts at popular education gave way to the need to satisfy the palate of the audience with spicy superficialities drawn from the interests of the day. The singer Sontag proclaimed her love of art in the Königstadt, which, to the credit of the audience, was at least not a popular one. Other fashionable items, including a full staging of an Italian opera, were the continuation of this tendency, which aimed to give the bad tastes of the middle- and lower-middle classes a faint glimmer of the pleasures and tastes of the idle rich in the aristocratic districts. Wherever a so-called folk sensibility came through, it was an enthrallment directed upwards rather than an education directed downwards. This people's theater, the delight of the bourgeoisie in trivial representations of the life of the people, was realized on the stage of the Königstadt Theater. Angely transplanted French vaudeville here with German clumsiness, [Friedrich] Beckmann followed with his farce *Nante*, and Holtei's *Alte Feldherrn* [*Old Commander*] introduced the fashionable enthusiasm for Poland onto the stage with its own popular songs, followed by other fashionable causes. This was and still is the state of the Königstadt Theater as "popular education": the enthrallment of the

bourgeoisie to trivializations of lower middle-class life, the life of the people, and the movements and issues of the day.

The proletarians and the lower classes have their own artistic institutions in some corners of the capital. One of these is very close to the Tiergarten district. The theater consists of a small, dark hut which is characteristically nicknamed “The Shaky Wall.” The troupe is a family—husband, wife, a few children—who took on this business merely to lure customers to their bar. Here, the poorest come to socialize: propertyless workers, ship’s boys, day laborers, and unemployed craftsmen. Prostitution, too, is found here in its deepest degradation. The spectators sit on wooden benches or on the floor and see, for an entry fee of 1½ Groschen, the most marvelous burlesques and the most senseless, disconnected presentations. Schnapps and a light beer-like drink are passed around and the spectators often participate in the actors’ sad comedy. The end is usually of the sort that one expects from the drunkenness and moral laxity of these people from the “lower depths.” We shouldn’t be surprised to note that the police, who are always nearby, are powerless to change or improve the situation. Other “orderly” theaters of this sort, scattered throughout other neighborhoods, are not fundamentally different. The audience is comprised of maids and craftsmen, looking for entertainment after work. Sometimes it ends in a brawl, and the anger of both sides is often re-directed towards the police. These are the only places where the “folk” seeks spiritual enjoyment, intellectual rejuvenation, and even if the circumstances here are most pathetic, one should remember that the propertyless classes have nothing else.

The Royal Theater is, as I have already suggested, a pleasure palace for the wealthy. The new opera house is surely one of the grandest on the whole continent, while the theater and concert hall for French comedies offer a small segment of the population their entertainment. One would believe that, in a city like Berlin, extraordinary efforts would be made for the main entertainment center of the propertied classes. Yet under the present government or, more accurately, since the installation of Munich’s Herr von Küstner as artistic director in Berlin, so many voices have protested the lack of a cultural life worthy of a capital city that it is worth looking at the state of affairs at the court theater under the helm of Chevalier Küstner.

Under the late king, it was, of course, the ballet that could pride itself on its growth. It was one of the small and harmless pleasures of the dear departed, which he rarely wanted to miss, even in places where it hardly seemed worthy of a visit. On private stages, in the Palais and in Potsdam the dancers were queens for a day, or better for the night, and even the great opera auditions were often graced with a visit by the crowned connoisseur. It must have been quite something to see the old gentleman there with his loyal companion, General von Witzleben, seated as usual atop the prompter’s box, studying the posture of the weightless little cupids. If they earned his special satisfaction, they would probably receive a special honor. In the Royal Palais there was an old man of integrity, the chamberlain Timm, who supplied excellent wines and tasty morsels to the king’s table. This Herr Timm invited some of the little ladies one evening. When it became clear what this distinction entailed, it became an object of envy. If they were in a good mood while visiting Papa Timm, the doors suddenly opened and, by coincidence, the king made an entrance. The friendly old gentleman did not want to disturb at all, and he usually stayed in the jovial company until midnight. Many clemency pleas were granted here, much financial support given to young lovers eager to marry, many able candidates were approved if the applicants were lucky enough to have one of the winged little favorites as their protector. These tranquil times are gone, and the epoch of the new regime is also marked in the chronicles of the theater. The leotard was replaced by Sophocles’ toga. It is said that one day the then-crown prince comforted his spouse with the following words: “Stay calm, my child, my father lets them jump about, we’re going to let them go!” Certainly, the poorest had a sense of their fate, but they didn’t love their patron any less for it. Following the funeral procession was a long parade of carriages in which the abandoned winged goddesses sat crying, their little legs dangling.

Under the previous king, the ballet prospered, but the Berlin stage was considered the best in Germany

for opera and recitations. Berlin was the dream of every ambitious artist, we need not mention here the names of Ludwig Devrient, Iffland, Lemm, Krüger, and Seydelmann. Now the ballet company is reduced to a very modest size. But does that mean that more resources are devoted to theater and opera? We shall see.

Concerning the theater, to be fair we must admit that the dearth of competent actors in Germany is a general one. The reason for this is the lack of drama schools. There is a great deal of acting talent in Germany, found even in traveling companies and on provincial stages. But circumstances do not allow these actors the possibility of serious study, and if they do have a bit of security, they often fall prey to their pride. The end of the song is a typical one: they seek to please the crowd with crass effects. They substitute understanding of character with hollow declamation, replace warm feeling with curtain-tearing gestures. If a genius happens to turn up suddenly—a raw, natural power—even this will be destroyed because it is given over to its manners and must degenerate into mere mannerism. Only education, schooling, and consciousness can bring an actor to maturity. If an example is called for here, let's look at the case of one considered to be a well-rounded actor. Döring is certainly a great talent, he has above all the means and a rare gift. Only his high tragic presentations are without character and unity, a soul is lacking in them. The few great moments, which he recently demonstrated as Lear, Richelieu, and Shylock, are proof of this. These are isolated instances, as a whole, his performance lacks psychology and consciousness.

A glance at the repertory is sufficient to show the scorn offered to the Berlin audiences. The dregs of our own shallow everyday productions are not bad enough, one rushes to every pale French triviality. The plays of Madame Birch-Pfeiffer, decrepit old Kotzebue miseries, and useless one-act comedies alternate with the *Marquis von Letorrières* and *Voltaires Ferien*. For a long time, the repertory consisted of *Thomas Thyrnau*, *Er muß aus Land*, *Er muß aufs Land*, and *Thomas Thyrnau*. As with the submission of the best original works, here is just an example. Friedrich Hebbel had Madame Krelinger deliver his *Maria Magdalena*—a drama torn from real life, with well-developed characters—to the examination commission. He was given back a printed form declaring the play "not usable," despite the fact—and this we know from Herr von Küstner's own mouth—that the general manager had not even read it. If new productions are ever introduced, it usually happens as a result of public acclaim and loud applause that the play earned elsewhere. The sudden forced rehearsals usually result in a poor production. Vienna, Stuttgart, Dresden, Leipzig, Hamburg, and even tiny Oldenburg are ahead of Berlin. And only six years ago, the Berlin stage counted as the first in Germany.

[…]

Source: Ernst Dronke, *Berlin* (1846). East Berlin: Rütten & Loening, 1953, pp. 342–49.

Translation: Jonathan Skolnik

Recommended Citation: Ernst Dronke on Popular Theater, Bourgeois Theater, and Court Theater in Berlin (1846), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/from-vormaerz-to-prussian-dominance-1815-1866/ghdi:document-350> [September 05, 2026].