

Review of Wolfgang Borchert's Radio Play *Draußen vor der Tür* (November 27, 1947)

Abstract

The writer Wolfgang Borchert was one of the most important representatives of the so-called *Trümmerliteratur* [Rubble Literature]. During the war, he was charged several times with undermining the morale of the military; he was wounded on the frontline and became gravely ill at the war's end. He died in 1947 at the age of twenty-six. In his radio play *Draußen vor der Tür* [*The Man Outside*], which was staged as a theater production at the end of 1947, Borchert tried to give expression to the feelings of an uprooted and desperate generation of war returnees.

Source

He Tears his Heart Bloody

A review by Josef Müller-Marein

Shortly before the premiere of his play at the *Kammerspiele* in Hamburg, the playwright died in Basel, for his friends had taken him, ill as he was, to Switzerland, where he was supposed to recuperate. He called for his family and friends when he felt the approach of death, which had long since been familiar to him, confined as he was to the sickbed for years. But just as he could not do them the favor of getting well, they could not do him the kindness of coming to him. The borders. [...] "Is there no one who answers? Is there no one, no one who answers?"

The playwright had his hero speak these words, provided one can speak of a hero, since this is a man who is broken by the "hero's duty" of the war. They are the words with which the play *The Man Outside* ends. Nearly a minute after the curtain had come down it was quiet in the theater before applause erupted. So powerful was the shock of this play, which revealed itself more and more as the biography of an entire generation and, in many respects, as the playwright's self-profession.

He has now died lonely like his hero, lonely and "there, outside the door." Wolfgang Borchert was his name, twenty-six years of age. And in view of this coincidence of success and death it is almost frivolous to say that contemporary German literature has become poorer by one hope. For in view of the events of our time, what does contemporary German literature matter! A lot of these feelings were palpable at the premiere.

The writer Peter de Mendelssohn, who was persecuted by the Nazis and thus given an opportunity to examine the Germans at an objectivizing distance, recently said something to the effect of: we all tend to move the problems onto the stage instead of inside of us, so that we can then return home reassured that nothing more is necessary. Though that may sound harsh and rejecting – there seems to be much that is correct in his observation.

Now to Borchert's piece! If one did not know that it was not originally intended for the theater, one would have immediately felt it anyway. And strangely enough: the traits foreign to the theater did not make the work any less effective. To be sure, the subtitle declares it "A play that no theater will want to put on and no audience will want to see," but the playwright was wrong. Thirteen stage companies have taken the play into their repertoire, a play to which Ernst Rowohlt, as the publisher of Borchert's remaining – of course, not very extensive – work, has devoted an almost loving book edition. And let us

not be mistaken, it will not soon disappear from the repertoires. And what is today seared into our heart is likely to remain interesting later on, at least as evidence of the *Sturm-und-Drang* experience of our days.

It was Ernst Schnabel, the dramaturgist of the *Nordwestdeutscher Rundfunk* [Northwest German Radio], who was the first to discover Wolfgang Borchert's talent, this young man from Hamburg, who had returned incurably sick (Russian hepatitis – according to the doctors) from political incarceration and the war. And if one figures the broad circle of those who listen to a radio play, one can say: no piece had ever become so widely known before its theater premiere.

But three questions remain concerning the transplanting of this piece from the radio to the stage: might it have been possible, at the very outset, to depict death, this stuffed, belching demon in a frock coat, as less philistine, and have him speak somewhat less to the audience? Was it necessary that the personification of the Elbe appeared in person this time, visibly in the dress of the magic theater? And was it also necessary for "God" to come in person, an old, wobbly, whining man with the mask of an actor who does not know: should he play the painter Menzel or the graphic artist Zille?

These characters were intended for the radio play, for the play of voices, and perhaps it might have been possible to have God and the Elbe "appear" only as voices in the theater. In any case, there is no doubt that herein lies the weaknesses not only of the staging, but also of the play itself.

The soldier has returned from war and captivity to a place where he no longer finds a home, wretched, starving, sick, and with that disgusting mop of hair that the prisoners from Russian camps have to bring back; and so he drags himself – a young man full of good will – through the pitilessness, the fear, and the despair that today make up daily life in Germany; there he sees death devouring the starved, the emaciated, just like it devoured the soldiers during war; there he tears his heart bloody on the thorny thicket of phrases that is still proliferating profusely today, especially when young people are being assaulted by pallid teachings; and after he had sought death in the Elbe in vain, he dies "outside the door" of those who are doing better. No wonder that he had to despair of God! But there is a difference between despairing of a God who is harsh and cruelly great, harsher still and crueler than the God of the Old Testament, or of a God who has shriveled to a whining old man. Young playwrights should allow themselves to be advised, if not theologically or philosophically, then dramaturgically, to either entirely abolish the God of whom they despair, or to let him exist mightily in cruel mystery. A small God – and the play runs the risk of becoming small. And then to make a small God visible – so much the worse.

Incidentally, the speech that Wolfgang Liebeneiner inserted into this play, which moves between the extremes of black and white, is charged with that rare burning electricity that endows the penetrating urgency of the artistic device – namely the expressive repetition of the same phrases – with the greatest possible intensity of expression. Within the framework of Koniarisky's set, which very felicitously traced the boundary between reality and supra-reality, the changing dialogue scenes still revealed the subtleties of the ensemble play that has moved into the background here.

Käte Pantow stood out because she made the eccentrically constructed role of a young woman believable through her natural temperament. Incidentally, it would be worth pondering why a young playwright like Borchert seems to look upon women the way they used to be generally seen (a long time ago): mostly as beautiful ornaments of life. Incisive, contoured: Hermann Schomberg as "Fat Death," Erwin Geschonneck as a frivolous cabaret director, Gerhard Ritter as the type of those genuine militarists who do not cease passing off their tired old cadet school phrases as idealism.

Borchert, who was himself an actor for a time, dedicated his play to one actor of this stage: Hans Quest, who in suffering and accusation, in lethargy, and foaming explosion, as a returning soldier and central figure of the play, raced through all phases of thespian possibilities. A virtuoso achievement, and all the

more impressive in that not only his skill was involved, but above all his heart.

Source: Josef Müller-Marein, "Da reißt er sein Herz blutig," *Die Zeit*, November 27, 1947

Translation: Thomas Dunlap

Recommended Citation: Review of Wolfgang Borchert's Radio Play *Draußen vor der Tür* (November 27, 1947), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/occupation-and-the-emergence-of-two-states-1945-1961/ghdi:document-4589>> [April 29, 2024].