Otto Brahm, “The People’s Free Stage” (1890)

Abstract

The *Freie Volksbühne* [“People’s Free Stage”] was founded in March 1890 as a proletarian theater by Bruno Wille (1860–1928). It was designed as a “social democratic” form of theater to cater to working class sensibilities and to meet the need for political organization. At the time of the theater's founding, the Social Democratic Party was outlawed – it only became legal with the expiry of the Anti-Socialist Law at midnight on September 30, 1890. Nonetheless, the following account shows that even prior to this point social democratic organizations still influenced and mobilized the German working class.

Source

An ample hall, completely packed; a gathering of a couple thousand men and women, persevering with devoted attention until past midnight, an enthusiastic unanimity in their goals – this was the picture to be had at the first meeting to found a People’s Free Stage on Tuesday, July 29, in the Bohemian Brewery.

The idea to establish a People’s Free Stage came from the socialists. The conference that decided to realize the plan was a socialist undertaking. And the socialists will form the majority among the members of the association. This will determine the character and meaning of the new enterprise from here on out.

The buzzword invented by the newspapers to describe the undertaking, “a social democratic theater,” was, to be sure, justifiably rejected by the founder of the People’s Free Stage, Dr. Bruno Wille. Just as the fashionable theaters that satisfy the taste of a broad spectrum of the middle class can hardly be described as progressive or nationally liberal, the notion of a social democratic theater, in the strictest sense, can hardly be imagined. And for this simple reason – while it is certainly possible to have a socialist audience, there cannot be any socialist plays. Where the political party is victorious, the work of art dies.

However, even if party politics are not supposed to dominate the repertoire of the People’s Free Stage, and even if Lassalle’s “Ferdinand von Sickingen” was rejected right at the outset, then, according to Wille, “a socially critical air” will still imbue both the audience and the plays of the People’s Stage. Ibsen and Tolstoy among the foreign playwrights, and Hauptmann, Holz, and Schlaf among the Germans, will be at the top of the repertoire – plays with a socially critical spirit. “Robespierre” by Griepenkerl and “The Death of Danton” by Büchner represent the link to the ideas of the revolution. The plays of Julius Hart, Bleibtreu, and Alberti, on the other hand, fit neither of these categories, and for this reason they occupy a rather murky position at the bottom of the repertoire.

The measured sensibility that underlies this preliminary concept has created the most auspicious conditions for this new undertaking. When the strictest socialist yardstick is applied, Ibsen is lumped into the middle class, and great effort is expended to prove how Ibsen’s poetic philosophy and Marx’ scientific philosophy are two very distinct phenomena. The People’s Free Stage, however, wants to leave plenty of room for the author of “Nora,” “The Ghosts,” “The Enemy of the People,” and “The Pillars of Society.” – Because this theater is not so fanatical as to miss the fact that this “aristocratic radical,” as he is called today, with his defiant faith in the individual, and with his contempt for the lies of society, is, nevertheless, inwardly quite close to the socialist spirit. And when the character Auler in “The Pillars of Society” asks in a production on the new stage: “How can capitalism introduce the new inventions before society has educated a generation that knows how to make use of them?” – only then will some

recognize, with astonishment, how a great writer whose viewpoint encompasses everything, the pathos of the individual and the suffering of all, knows how to capture the essence of the masses' immediate interests.

But then will the battalions of workers, whose footsteps should now also be heard in the theater, be able to take from these profound works of art anything other than fragments, accidental fragments, which are just opening themselves up to their minds? I wish that everyone who asks such questions would have attended the meeting last Tuesday. I myself, I must confess, had doubts along these lines until now; and even now I am far from believing that all the mysteries of Ibsen's craft will suddenly somehow reveal themselves to the audience of the People's Free Stage. And I am just as far from believing that all patrons of our People's Free Stage understand the intentions of Ibsen and the other naturalists – I say here understand, not love. But that, in any case, is what I mean: that this People's Free Stage will attract an enviably fresh and receptive audience that is free from stubborn prejudices. The so-called understanding of art, however, and the formation of taste – both of which result from education, not inheritance – will be acquired in time by this mass audience with its "intellectual greediness."

The skeptics should have seen how lively this congregation of two thousand people (workers, young salespeople, women) was in reacting to the speaker who wanted to spoil their taste for Ibsen. He had spoken with foolish phrases about the plays in which the main theme is supposedly "mostly about a softening of the brain," had exclaimed emphatically: "Something like this of course does not happen with us!" and he, a non-socialist, had wanted to overwhelm the suckers on the main floor with Lassalles' "Sickingen." However, not only did the schooled party stalwart, Mr. *Baake*, disparage his con game in rough fashion, but a strong protest also came from amongst the workers. A man stood up, in his work clothes, plain, just as he had come from the factory, with an unstarched shirt, his features revealing his distress, and it was not easy for him to find the words he wanted. But it was moving to hear how this worker developed a program that any one of us naturalists could have endorsed: we don't want to see a never-ending lie on the stage boards, he called out, we want to experience the truth about life and prefer to see what is terrible, evil and sick, rather than have someone throw dust in our eyes about noble counts and councilors of commerce, who spend one hundred mark bills like they are going out of style. And this was the phrase that sounded like a leitmotif throughout the congregation: give us truth! Not classical or romantic plays, we want realistic ones in which the urge for truthfulness and the keen sense of reality of this era are expressed. We want to see life like it is, not like it isn't!

And the same unanimity, with which the positive goals of the People's Stage were outlined, now marked the critical attitude taken towards the existing theater, towards the extravagant stages that are ruled by one thing alone: money. One can affirm the productions of the likes of Mr. Wille and his comrades, not merely from the point of view of socialism – which abhors theatrical enterprises, just as it does other capitalistic undertakings – , but also from purely artistic considerations. These productions present the dominance of the cash register with all its consequences: the ruthless exploitation of success, retrogression into the trivial, the cult of superficiality. The commercial theaters of today are, of necessity, what they are, and this is recognized by everyone. However, the attempts that are being undertaken, here and there, at times guided by literary considerations, as with our Free Stage, at other times by social considerations, as with the People's Free Stage, these attempts demonstrate clearly the general need for reforms, which will be realized one way or the other.

This need is an urgent one for us, Dr. Wille explained. Its fulfillment cannot wait for the general political and economic development to take its course: "Because we are human beings with needs in the present moment, we must then provide for the present moment." And this was the significant development at the meeting: that the artistic needs of the people were recognized with a decisiveness that was not marred by a single doubt. Quite isolated from the rest, a speaker stood up, who, without himself being opposed to the cause, attempted with unclear ideas to defer the discussion; and he was taken to task with buoyant unanimity. No one, however, spoke up to say: "We don't need this stage, what is theater

supposed to do for us – we should help first to allay the more immediate needs, proletarians have no use for the luxury of art!" Instead, the "intellectual greediness" of the crowd made itself blatantly apparent, and even if only the most talented among the workers of Berlin will be able to participate in this appeal, still this assembly remains convincing proof of the people's appetite for intellectual and artistic enjoyment. A ripple of idealism, in the best sense of the word, moved through audience, despite the realistic accents that the discussion of the repertoire had called forth. And because it is happening for the first time that broad masses of people are calling out with startling unanimity for art, and a sizeable political party is wholeheartedly supporting this appeal, it seems to me that this undertaking is a culturally and historically significant one, and those whose vision is unhampered by political blinders must recognize its far-reaching mission.

Therefore, I welcome this plan gladly, not from the stand point of a political party (because I do not belong to one and am, politically and aesthetically, a born savage); but rather because I discern in a People's Free Stage – not in a "social democratic theater" – an undertaking of the most general artistic and social significance, and my best wishes accompany its progress.

Source: Otto Brahm, "Die freie Volksbühne", *Freie Bühne für Modernes Leben*, Jg. 1, No. 27 (August 6, 1890), pp. 713–15; reprinted in Jürgen Schutte and Peter Sprengel, *Die Berliner Moderne 1885–1914*. Stuttgart, 1987, pp. 408–13.

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