

W. E. Yates. *Theatre in Vienna: A Critical History, 1776-1995*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. xx + 328 pp. \$59.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-42100-3.



Reviewed by Thomas K. Wolber

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W. Edgar Yates, Professor of German at the University of Exeter since 1972, is an expert on Austrian theater. Among his publications are books and articles on Grillparzer, Nestroy, Schnitzler, and Hofmannsthal. His latest work is a comprehensive study of Vienna's rich theater tradition, including opera and operetta. What distinguishes it from earlier studies on the subject, and what makes the book useful to both historians and literary scholars, is the fact that the author relates the culture of the theater "to the social, political, and intellectual history of the city" (p. xvi).

In 1776 Emperor Joseph II, an enlightened reformer, declared the so-called *Spektakelfreiheit* or *Schauspielfreiheit*, which made possible the first private and commercial theaters in Vienna. This far-reaching decision paved the way for the flowering of Viennese theater in the nineteenth century, and represents the beginning of modern theater.

Of course, the *Freiheiten* these theaters enjoyed were limited. In the didactic spirit of the Enlightenment, they were to teach proper manners and taste. Anything offending politics, religion,

and morality was excised. Plays depicting death, funerals, or graves were likewise forbidden. Several plays by Shakespeare, for instance, were banned "for ever" (p. 14).

Strict censorship was also practiced by the successors of Joseph II, albeit for different reasons—namely to protect the monarchy and the church during revolutionary times. Plays by Lessing, Goethe, and Schiller were either banned outright or radically bowdlerized by the censors. Extemporization, straying from the approved text, was punishable by imprisonment. In addition to external censorship, "financial self-interest consequently dictated that there had to be a considerable degree of self-censorship" (p. 39). As a result, the quality of the repertoire suffered. Nevertheless, because the political arena was closed to the public, the theater and debate about the theater were able to serve, to some extent, "as a covert function for discussion of society as a whole" (p. 118). Censorship remained in place until the end of the monarchy in 1918, and was finally declared illegal by the constitutional court in 1926.

Chapter 3 explores the history of the Old Burgtheater between 1810 and 1888. Special attention is given to Joseph Schreyvogel, Heinrich Laube, and Franz von Dingelstedt, arguably the most influential Burgtheater directors at that time. Schreyvogel, in spite of restricted powers, did much to encourage indigenous talents, for example Grillparzer. At the same time, however, he also constructed a repertoire of international dimensions. Laube's appointment in 1849 was a concession toward the new libertarian spirit (he had served as a delegate to the Frankfurt parliament), but he resigned when he felt he was about to lose his autonomy and could no longer direct dramas on current social issues. Dingelstedt's era was one "of consolidation rather than of innovation" (p. 80). New dramatists such as Ibsen were rejected; not one of the Norwegian's plays was seen in the Old Burgtheater by the time it closed in 1888.

Needless to say, censorship continued throughout the nineteenth century. It is interesting to see that the Burgtheater's well-known tradition of emphasizing not the play, but the actor, has one of its origins in censorship. The plays performed did not seem to matter that much; instead, an "almost religious cult of personality" (Stefan Zweig) surrounded the Burgtheater and its actors (see pp. 15 and 61).

At the heart of Vienna's commercial theaters were entertaining comedies and parodies, often in Viennese dialect. The popular predilection for spectacle had to be catered to, including, for example, equestrian display on stage. Often, financial profit was a more pressing concern than artistic merit. It was at these *Volkstheater* where Raimund's and Nestroy's burlesque, farcical comedies, were performed successfully. After 1848-49, however, the dialect drama (*Lokalposse*) began to make room for operettas and operas. Initially, the Italian opera dominated (Salieri, Cherubini, Rossini, Donizetti, etc.). Mozart enjoyed a limited success only, with the exception of his Ital-

ian operas (see p. 143). A more propitious time for German opera did not arrive until after 1848/49 when Lortzing, Wagner, Offenbach, von Suppe, Strauss (Son), Milloeker, and Zeller emerged. Operettas such as *Der Bettelstudent*, *Die Fledermaus*, and *Der Zigeunerbaron* then carried the day.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Vienna had grown to a city of over one million inhabitants; by 1910, the two million mark was topped. The rapid growth of the population had significant consequences for the commercial theater. To accommodate the tastes of the newcomers, who were mostly industrial proletariat, the classics were de-emphasized. "Superficial comedies" (p. 167) and "frivolous triviality" (p. 168) were favored, sure to be cash-box successes. Increasingly, theaters were a mere "business without artistic principles" (p. 171), as one contemporary critic put it.

One of the more shameful chapters of Austrian theater history is the *Kaiserjubilaeums-Stadttheater*, founded as an "Aryan" and pan-German theater. It was closely associated with the Christian Social Party, the anti-Semitic party led by the notorious mayor of Vienna, Karl Lueger. During Adam Mueller-Guttenbrunn's reign as director (appointed in 1898), the theater was particularly ferocious in its program. However, it had to pay a high price for its ideological zealotry. Insolvency loomed, and its director had to resign in 1903. It would have been interesting to see which plays were performed at the *Kaiserjubilaeums-Stadttheater* during that period, but uncharacteristically Yates does not identify them.

The flowering of modernism in turn-of-the-century Vienna was, in part, due to Max Burckhard, Burgtheater director from 1890 to 1898, who favored Modernists and Naturalists. Foreign dramatists such as Ibsen, Strindberg, Shaw, Wilde, Maeterlinck, and Molnar were performed in Vienna as well as indigenous writers such as Anzenberger, Sudermann, G. Hauptmann, Schnitzler,

Wedekind, Schoenherr, Hofmannsthal, and Wildgans.

After World War I, theaters were in trouble. Fuel was in short supply. For several years, cultural establishments were closed on certain days of the week. At other times, performances were timed in order to save energy. The professional and middle classes could not afford to maintain their regular theater-going. Staff cuts were inevitable, and the repertoire dwindled. In addition, a new entertainment tax was imposed upon theaters, concert halls, and movie theaters in 1918. After the rates doubled in 1921, several theaters closed. Furthermore, the general population of Vienna had declined, down to 1.8 million, and there was now an excess of entertainment opportunities. To remain lucrative, some establishments were turned into movie theaters or degenerated into "seedy nude shows" (p. 212). It appeared as if the death of Austrian theater tradition was imminent.

In 1938, the year of the *Anschluss*, a radical reorganization and "aryanization" of Austrian cultural life took place. The exclusion of Jews from all theaters, cinemas, and concerts was mandated. Many talented individuals went into exile or perished. Because of heavy subsidies and closed performances for soldiers, workers, students, etc., theater attendance actually rose. However, some two-thirds of the repertoire was no longer deemed suitable (see p. 224). The impoverishment of Austrian theater life was palpable. Again, Yates does not provide much data about the fascist literature of the *Anschluss* time. He does mention nationalistic dramatists such as Mirko Jelusich, who served for a time as Burgtheater director, or Hans Naderer's right-wing drama, *Lueger, der grosse Oesterreicher*, but the information remains sporadic and inadequate.

In 1944-45, by state order, all theaters were closed as part of the war effort, and even Nazi art could no longer be performed. Darkness had descended upon Austria and its cultural tradition.

After the war, the tried and proven classics were resurrected--operas by Mozart and Beethoven, comedies by Raimund and Nestroy, and dramas by Grillparzer and Hofmannsthal. The paucity of theater life remained for quite some time. The discovery or rediscovery of contemporary dramatists (such as Frisch and Duerrenmatt or Brecht and Horvath) was slow in coming, often resulting in vitriolic controversy.

Even today, the theater scene is rife with conflict. In his final pages, Yates describes the debate surrounding Claus Peymann, Burgtheater director from 1986 to 1997. In his attempt to modernize the theater, he favored iconoclastic writers such as Bernhard, Tabori, Turrini, Jelinek, and Mitterer. However, this provoked the bitter resistance of the conservative parties, the OeVP and the FPÖ, that charged him with "destroying the integrity of Burgtheater tradition" (p. 240).

However, conflict can also be a sign of health and vigor. Yates maintains that, despite setbacks, theatrical life in Vienna "is not stagnating." On the contrary, interest in the theater "shows no sign of abating." The author is confident "that the vitality and individuality of Viennese theatre will survive" (p. 245).

W.E. Yates' book is generous in its data, meticulous in its presentation, and reliable in its accuracy. (The only question mark I have is Yates' translation of an eighteenth-century "Ballhaus" as an "indoor tennis-court" [pp. 6, 51].) The study provides an incredibly detailed history of the Viennese theater tradition since 1776, down to the exact remuneration of the actors. However, given the book's focus on factual "social history," there is little room for actual literary interpretation. Historiography, as impressive as it may be, cannot and must not serve as a substitute for the content analysis of autonomous works of art. In order to gain a full understanding of all dimensions of Vienna's rich theater tradition, a book such as Yates' would have to be complemented with a companion volume devoted solely to literature.

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