

Dream Palaces: Regional Theatres in Britain and Germany at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century

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Theatre in Britain and Germany has rarely been discussed in comparative perspective – a perspective which did not seem worthwhile in relation to two countries whose theatre traditions, it has been asserted, are fundamentally different and, in fact, incompatible. Commentators have been almost unequivocal in their claim that German theatre has always been characterised by large public subsidies, avant-garde experiments and a serious educational approach. By contrast British theatre seems to have been almost entirely denoted by commercialism, with playhouses firmly placed in Britain's laissez faire economy, and entertaining, superficial even, rather than aesthetically challenging repertoires. Martin Esslin concluded that, in contrast to Germany, 'artistic concepts *naturally* did not play any role in this kind of theatre'.¹

To challenge these claims I will take a brief look at regional theatres in England's industrial north at the turn of the nineteenth century and compare them to playhouses in the German Ruhr district from about the same time. York's Theatre Royal (especially after the 1870s renovation programme), Leeds' Grand Theatre and Opera House (built in 1878), Sheffield's Lyceum (1897), and Bradford's Alhambra (1914) are not only proof of an increasing financial viability of theatrical ventures but also signify growing civic pride and artistic ambitions with their grand neo-Gothic façades, domes and turrets, and elaborate glass and steel canopies. Although many of them were still part of national chains it may be argued that they pre-empted a movement of increasingly independent playhouses steering away from metropolitan dominance, developing and illustrating distinctive local and regional identities, and often questioning a climate which seemed to favour financial success over artistic merits – a development which the Repertory Movement soon picked up on and which was clearly mirrored by regional theatres in Germany.² In essence I am arguing

¹ Martin Esslin, "Wohin geht das englische Theater? Eine Bilanz – gezogen im Sommer 1963," *Theater heute* (August 1963), 28. One of the common points in stressing the differences has been the claim that British theatres concentrated entirely on amusement (see Richard Martin, "Hinter den Kulissen. Einige erfolgsbedingende Faktoren des englischen Theaters: Geld, Macht und Subvention," in: Klaus-Dieter Fehse, Nobert Platz (eds.), *Das zeitgenössische englische Drama. Einführung, Interpretation, Dokumentation* (Frankfurt: Athenäum Fischer, 1975), 11).

² See George Rowell, Anthony Jackson (eds.), *The Repertory Movement. A History of Regional Theatre in Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). Contemporary and near-contemporary accounts include Cecil Chisholm, *Repertory. An Outline of the Modern Theatre Movement. Production, Plays, Management* (London: Davies, 1934); T. Alec Seed, *The Sheffield Repertory Theatre. A History* (Sheffield: Sheffield Repertory Company, 1959); J.C.

that the alleged differences between regional theatre in Britain and Germany around the turn of the century were minimal and, in fact, the similarities are striking. A reassessment of this crucial period in both countries seems overdue.

In the early 1930s the Central European correspondent of Britain's leading theatre journal *Theatre World* suggested some reasons for the fundamental differences in attitude towards theatre in Britain and Germany. He asserted that in a typical performance at a British theatre

if a certain scene is unrolled before the eyes of the spectator, it is difficult to conceive the necessity of repeating the contents of the scene and specially referring to it in another. Such repetitions are merely for the benefit of late-comers and members of the audience who stay for an act in the bar and wish to return to the play without having missed anything. [...] Max Reinhardt, after reading a translation of a popular English play, remarked to me: 'Here goes another Derby-play.' Asking him what he meant by this expression he explained: 'That's a typical English play. Everything is repeated so often that play-goers can safely go to the races and be an hour late for the theatre without missing anything!'³

Plays which proved highly successful in Britain during the first half of the twentieth century were apparently more or less useless in Germany and Max Reinhardt's comments on the 'Derby play' seem typical of German attitudes towards the British theatre. German commentators expressed their astonishment at the long prevailing influence of melodrama, farce and musical comedy. They commented on the thinness of productions on the commercial West End stage and looked askance at an audience, which seemed to lack both political consciousness and any kind of critical interest in aesthetic questions.⁴ Dramaturgy, for example, was a term nobody in Britain seemed to have heard of when this concept had already been established at German theatres for almost 200 years. In the 1930s German theatre émigrés called the West End a 'cultural desert' regarding scene design, acting and production methods long superseded on continental

Trewin, *The Birmingham Repertory Theatre 1913-1963* (London: Barrie and Rockliff, 1963); Thomas C. Kemp, *Birmingham Repertory Theatre. The Playhouse and the Man. With a Foreword by Sir Barry Jackson* (2nd rev. edn, Birmingham: Cornish, 1948); Grace Wyndham Goldie, *The Liverpool Repertory Theatre 1911-1934* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1935).

³ "Flashlights from Central Europe," *Theatre World* (January 1935), 35.

⁴ Leopold von Hoesch, the German ambassador in London, explained why Werner Krauß, the eminent German actor, did not enjoy any success in Britain with Hauptmann's play *Before Sunrise*. According to von Hoesch the main reason was that the drama's character did not meet the audience's desire for entertainment and 'nice impressions' (qtd. in Joseph Wulf, *Theater und Film im Dritten Reich. Eine Dokumentation* (Berlin: Ullstein, 1983), 208-9). Similar considerations were voiced by German theatre émigrés in the 1930s who found it difficult to establish themselves on British stages. They blamed the British insularity and the gap between the two theatre systems (see Günter Berghaus, "The Emigrés from Nazi Germany and their Contribution to the British Theatrical Scene," in: Werner E. Mosse et. al. (eds.), *Second Chance. Two Centuries of German-Speaking Jews in the United Kingdom* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1991), 297-299).

stages.⁵ Julius Berstl summed up the typical English play as 'Act 1 – tea is served. Act 2 – cocktails are served. Act 3 – whisky is served'.⁶

British observers, too, have concentrated on the differences when attempting a comparative perspective. The extraordinary subsidies and the seriousness with which the Germans regarded their theatre, their 'odd' taste for monumental classics and the radical avant-garde continues to amuse British commentators to this day.⁷ It seems difficult to comprehend for anyone outside Germany how a city like Berlin, although being plunged in debt, treats itself to three full-scale opera houses and has an arts budget which is bigger than that of the Arts Council of England. John Ardagh claims that the scale of spending for the arts would not only give any British government a heart attack 'but also would soon spark off a ratepayers' revolt',⁸ while Mark Ravenhill has recently stressed what he believes to be the fundamental differences in audience expectations in the two countries. He asserted that in contrast to British theatregoers (and undoubtedly due to the Brechtian influence) a 'German audience is used to having no points of empathy with the characters' and 'naturalism is frowned upon as intellectually unjustifiable'.⁹

The general assumption of an incompatibility of theatre in Britain and Germany has hardly been challenged so far – on the contrary. Esslin's statement quoted at the beginning has recently been reinforced by the eminent German theatre historian Henning Rischbieter who praises Esslin's article as the 'fundamental' introduction to the topic.¹⁰ Points of contact appear few and far between. As an example, the much-publicised 1907 Berlin visit of Herbert Beerbohm Tree, Edwardian Britain's leading actor-manager, almost seems to sum up the differences. To start with, it is hardly imaginable for him to have been invited at all had it not been for his distant German ancestry (in the German press he was often alluded to as 'our man in London'). Corresponding to the image of a nation that spends vast sums of taxpayers' money on the theatre and sees no problem in a close connection between government and the arts (even interference), Tree and his company were invited by the German emperor Wilhelm II to appear at Berlin's Royal Opera House and even travelled there in the

⁵ See Günter Berghaus, "Producing Art in Exile: Perspectives on the German Refugees' Creative Activities in Great Britain," in: Günter Berghaus (ed.), *Theatre and Film in Exile. German Artists in Britain, 1933-1945* (Oxford: Berg, 1989), 39-40.

⁶ Qtd. in Alan Clarke, "'They Came to a Country': German Theatre Practitioners in Exile in Great Britain, 1938-45," in: Berghaus, *Theatre and Film*, 101.

⁷ See, for example, Peter Fischer, "Doing Princely Sums – Structure and Subsidy," in: Ronald Hayman (ed.), *The German Theatre. A Symposium* (London: Oswald Wolff, 1975), 215-217; similarly John Ardagh, *Germany and the Germans* (3rd edn, London: Penguin, 1995), 314-324; C.D. Innes, *Modern German Drama. A Study in Form* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 1-2.

⁸ Ardagh, *Germany and the Germans*, 310.

⁹ Qtd. in Aleks Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (London: Faber, 2001), 133.

¹⁰ See *Theater heute* (April 2002), 76.

emperor's private train. And, of course, Tree did not appear in one of his signature roles, which had made him famous in England, as Svengali in du Maurier's *Trilby* or in Herman's *The Silver King* – quite obviously these were not deemed to correspond with the serious German taste. Instead Tree's company appeared in a week of Shakespearean repertoire. As an aside it is interesting to note that the most important point of contact between the two countries has indeed been Shakespeare and in particular the demands made on him for political reasons. Gerhart Hauptmann, for example, claimed in 1915 that 'there is no nation – not even England – which has acquired a similar claim to Shakespeare than Germany. Shakespeare's characters are part of our world, his soul has become one with ours: and although he was born and buried in England it is Germany where he truly lives'.¹¹

But what about theatre in the provinces? To what extent did German regional theatres and their repertoire at the turn of the century correspond to these issues? What about funding and the perception of theatre in society? In how far did regional theatres in England relate to the above assumptions? And what about possible points of contact between theatres in the two regions? First of all, let us briefly look at the situation in Yorkshire.

Regional Theatres in Yorkshire

Yorkshire's cities boomed during the second half of the nineteenth century, in particular its coal, steel and other manufacturing industries (Leeds, Sheffield), mills (Leeds, Bradford), railways (York, Hull), ports and docks (Hull). This economic surge, however, did not necessarily benefit the arts, as hardly any of these industrial centres offered their rising population sufficient opportunities for recreation and entertainment. Bradford had no permanent playhouse until 1864, and on the occasion of a royal visit to Leeds in 1858 Prince Albert remarked that Leeds was in desperate need of a good theatre.¹² By the end of the century, however, the situation had changed. Leeds's magnificent Grand Theatre and Opera House on Briggate opened in 1878 and has been the city's main theatrical venue ever since,¹³ Sheffield's spectacular Lyceum was built in 1897, and Bradford's sumptuous Alhambra – opened just before the outbreak of the First World War – too, belongs to this group of powerful statements of

¹¹ Gerhart Hauptmann, "Deutschland und Shakespeare," *Jahrbuch der Deutschen Shakespeare-Gesellschaft* 51 (1915), xii.

¹² The need became all the more pressing after the old Theatre Royal was destroyed by fire in 1875 and one year later the Amphitheatre suffered the same fate.

¹³ Other late nineteenth century additions to Leeds' theatre life included the Theatre Royal (1876), the Coliseum (1885), the Empire Palace Theatre (1898) and the City Varieties (1894).

civic pride.¹⁴ Yorkshire's theatres thrived, especially around the turn of the century. Many profited from improved facilities, growing well-to-do audiences and shrewd managers. At the same time this period was denoted by radical changes in the dissolution of resident ensembles and the concentration on touring companies instead, the establishment of large London-based entertainment empires that controlled whole chains of theatres across the country, and the competition from music halls and variety theatres as well as cinemas. Acknowledging the changing circumstances smaller circuits stressing a distinct regional, i.e. 'Yorkshire', identity, developed with managers like Francis Laidler who ran theatres in Leeds, Bradford and Keighley or John Beaumont who managed Leeds's Grand and Sheffield's Lyceum. In terms of repertoire the 'straight' playhouses looked at in this paper tried to counteract the appeal of the new variety places, which had increasingly succeeded the working-class music hall and tried to appeal to more middle-class audiences. York's Theatre Royal, for example, put on twice-nightly variety from 1906 in a move aimed at attracting the big audiences drawn by the newly opened Grand Opera House down the road.

Yorkshire's city councils welcomed these new theatre palaces and seemed increasingly keen to associate themselves with their popular and financial success. Many of them were managed by leading London-based actor-managers, and whenever York's Percy Hutchison or Leeds's Wilson Barrett cared to stop by their residencies turned into major civic occasions. City councils became even more interested in the newly established regional circuits and emerging repertory theatres with their distinctive local flavour. Although none of these theatres were supported by regular public subsidies and continued to be regarded as private enterprises, which had to pay their way, there are instances when councils also helped financially. In York, for example, the council indirectly subsidised a vast renovation programme of the Theatre Royal in 1901/2, when it subsequently scrapped the interest the proprietor had to pay on money borrowed.¹⁵ Theatres become part of municipal portfolios, they were used in publicity materials and their productions were increasingly reviewed in the leading national and regional newspapers. Local playgoers' societies sprang up everywhere and the loyal following they provided developed into an important aspect in the financial planning of a theatre. Crucially, these societies voiced their thoughts about repertoires, and one of the recurring themes is a criticism of a programme which puts artistic considerations aside in favour of providing healthy profits for the theatres' managers and their owners.

¹⁴ See Peter Holdsworth, *Domes of Delight. The History of Bradford Alhambra* (Bradford: Bradford Libraries and Information Service, 1989).

¹⁵ For more details on this incident see Anselm Heinrich, *Entertainment, Education, Propaganda. Regional Theatres in Germany and Britain Between 1918 and 1945* (London: University of Hertfordshire Press/Society for Theatre Research, 2007), 38.

At the same time, however, and corresponding to conventional approaches in theatre historiography which stress the pre-eminence of the business aspect in British theatre, the principal requirement for a manager was not to present a programme of artistic and educational value but to run his theatre as a sound business. A manager without financial success did not survive long, even if he was a gifted director and an outstanding actor. Wilson Barrett did not last 15 years at the helm of Leeds's Grand Theatre because he was one of the grandest and most successful actors of his time but because he was an acute businessman. And indeed, in terms of the comparative perspective taken here this business character *is* one of the major elements of continuity in British theatre history. To develop an artistic profile for their playhouse, building a rounded ensemble (if they had one), nurturing playwrights and thinking creatively about repertoire development, could only be a minor concern in Yorkshire. Kathleen Barker has observed that 'no [provincial] manager could afford to be too refined in his tastes: he had still to produce endless melodramas and "adaptations from the French", and to react quickly to contemporary events'.¹⁶ It seems that what made a theatre attractive was the question of how fast it could secure the latest London shows and how cheap its tickets were. Their programmes were mainly characterised by comedies, farces, musical plays, and light operas – another aspect of continuity.

Regional Theatres in Westphalia

But what about regional theatres in Germany then? Did they really differ fundamentally from this approach, as research so far would have us believe? In this essay I will concentrate on cities in the Ruhr district. Hagen, Dortmund and Bochum, and to a lesser degree Bielefeld, with their high reliance on industry developed on similar lines to Yorkshire's cities. This similarity was recognised by establishing a number of twin cities in both regions (albeit much later): Dortmund is twinned with Leeds, Bochum with Sheffield, Hamm with Bradford, and Münster with York. Both regions were industrial heartlands of their respective countries and, consequently, suffered particularly badly from bombing raids during the Second World War. Other parallels, and this might be surprising, include the theatre.

Before we turn to the playhouses in the *Ruhrgebiet*, however, let us have a look at an allegedly more typical German regional theatre. The theatre of the ancient city of Münster, like York a regional capital and diocesan town, opened in 1775 and was sustained by the enlightened prince-bishop Maximilian Friedrich. The *Comödien- und Redoutenhausß* was founded at a time when many 'enlightened' princes increasingly became patrons of the

¹⁶ Kathleen Barker, "Thirty Years of Struggle. Entertainment in Provincial Towns Between 1840 and 1870," *Theatre Notebook* 39 (1985), 145.

arts and entered into competition with one another. Münster's first purpose-built theatre was a result of such patronage. It featured its own company, staged Italian opera and classical drama – for example, Lessing's complete works, *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet*, as well as plays by Wieland and Goethe. Its architecture corresponded to the representational desire of the aristocracy with a special box for the prince-bishop and his entourage. The prince's financial generosity in fact largely accounted for the theatre's survival in the decades following its foundation. Münster, then, seems to be a typical German theatre and apparently illustrating perfectly the fundamental differences to theatre in Britain, particularly regarding its funding. According to this discourse the eventual taking over of the theatre in the early twentieth century by Münster's city council only seems a logical step.

The situation in Dortmund, Hagen, Bochum and Bielefeld, however, not only differs from Münster but also hints at parallels to Yorkshire. After Dortmund, a quickly growing city with a large manufacturing base, and significant coal and steel industry, had played host to visiting companies, a new theatre eventually opened in 1904 with all the pomp and circumstance Wilhelmine Germany could muster.¹⁷ The building of the playhouse, however, was neither initiated nor solely paid for by the authorities but by a group of citizens who began campaigning for a civic theatre during the late nineteenth century. The bourgeois group exerted pressure on the city council, raised money to contribute to the building costs and eventually funded half of the overall expenditure.¹⁸ The running of the theatre, too, was quite different from the financial security of later decades. The playhouse was leased to a *Privattheaterdirektor* who was responsible both in artistic and economic terms. This director resembled a general manager much more than an *Intendant* (artistic director). Although Dortmund's theatre was taken over by the city authorities before the First World War it is noteworthy that it owed its existence not to the generosity of a regional prince or the desire of the city council to educate its working-class citizens, but that the initiative came from bourgeois businessmen and academics.

In contrast to Dortmund Bielefeld was a city of commerce and a proud centre of eastern Westphalia. Despite the differences to Dortmund,

¹⁷ See Günther Högl, "Nimmer entbehre die strebende Stadt der veredelnden Künste. Opferfreudiger Sinn baute den Musen dies Heim'," *Heimat Dortmund* 2 (2004), 14-17, and Karin Schwarz, "Die Eröffnungsfeier des Dortmunder Stadttheaters," *ibid.*, 18-19.

¹⁸ Stephen Pielhoff has done considerable work on this aspect, both with regard to Dortmund (and Münster) as well as more generally on bourgeois patronage of the arts in Wilhelmine cities (see, for example, Stephen Pielhoff, "Bürgerliches Mäzenatentum und kommunale Kulturpolitik in Dortmund und Münster 1871-1933," *Mitteilungsblatt des Instituts für Soziale Bewegungen* 28 (2003), 37-79; or his "Stifter und Anstifter. Vermittler zwischen 'Zivilgesellschaft', Kommune und Staat im Kaiserreich," *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 33 (2007), 10-45. See also Jürgen Kocka, Manuel Frey (eds.), *Bürgerkultur und Mäzenatentum im 19. Jahrhundert* (Berlin: Fannei & Walz, 1998).

however, Bielefeld's theatre, too, owed its foundation to a bourgeois pressure group, which – similar to Dortmund's – raised money and lobbied politicians. The council decided that they would not be prepared to build a theatre unless M 200,000 (40% of the overall building costs) had been provided by donations.¹⁹ Only after these funds had been secured was the *Stadttheater* opened in 1904. It was subsequently leased to directors with the city waiving some of the costs including heating, lighting, water and the services of a fireman. Otherwise these directors were entirely responsible for the running of the theatre and made sure it remained a sound business venture. And indeed, until the First World War the lease system reaped financial rewards for the directors and annual profits reached RM 60,000 in 1910.²⁰

Hagen, an industrial city south of Dortmund, had had its own theatre since 1911. In a similar scenario, it owed its foundation to a bourgeois theatre society which had established a limited company in 1909 and had successfully canvassed for donations. Franz Ludwig became the manager of this first commercial playhouse. From the beginning a member of the city administration sat on its executive board but the municipal interest in the theatrical endeavours of the limited company was only slowly forthcoming and, tellingly, related to areas of control and censorship rather than financial commitment or any interest in artistic decisions and programming.

Even the situation in aforementioned Münster was not as straightforward as it seems as even though it enjoyed aristocratic patronage it was first and foremost a business venture. The prince-bishop soon lost interest in his theatre and withdrew some of his support, the company disbanded and the financial situation got tighter. In fact, and interesting in the present context, the theatre largely survived due to a bourgeois theatre committee whose members bought season tickets thereby guaranteeing a certain income from their subscriptions to cover the expenses. Financial difficulties continued, however. When the city became capital of the Prussian province of Westphalia in the early nineteenth century the magistrate took over the theatre – but only the building itself. This was then leased to impresarios who took over full responsibility and were bound to make a financial profit. This often proved difficult as the overall costs were immense and even box office successes could not guarantee the theatre would break even. Impresario August Pichler, celebrated in the twentieth century for his productions of the classics, largely relied on an altogether

¹⁹ In the end the 240 people providing M 170,000 was enough for the project to get the official go ahead (see Peter Schütze, "Annalen des Stadttheaters," in: Bühnen der Stadt Bielefeld (ed.), *75 Jahre Stadttheater Bielefeld 1904-1979* (Bielefeld: Kramer, 1979), 30-36).

²⁰ The municipal subsidy amounted to M 24,000 on average until 1914, the surplus reached M 46,000 in 1906-7 and M 60,000 in 1909-10 (see Schütze, "Annalen," 40). These profits came at a price, however, as rehearsal times remained short and as a rule did not exceed four rehearsals for every production as Fritz Brinkmann recalls (qtd. *ibid.*, 38).

different repertoire. His public complaints about declining audiences and empty seats in the dress circle, in particular when a company featuring dogs and monkeys came to a rival playhouse in Münster in 1851,²¹ are criticisms of an entrepreneur complaining of bad business rather than grievances of an artistic director about declining standards and 'deplorable' public tastes. When the theatre fell on hard times and could not be run for a profit any longer it was demolished – just as any theatre in a similar situation in Britain – and no one protested.

Münster's new theatre, the *Lortzing-Theater*, opened in a former aristocratic residence in 1895. Although it became increasingly perceived as a theatre of the city it was still privately owned and run as a commercial enterprise. The city council was only slowly forthcoming with respect to any longer-term commitments. From 1899 it paid an annual subsidy as a contribution to the running costs, and over the following years this subsidy rose significantly.²² More importantly the city bought the building in 1906 and renamed it *Civic Lortzing-Theater*. The new prefix, however, still did not quite relate to the theatre's actual position. The change of name may have indicated the city's desire to demonstrate that the playhouse was no longer a private enterprise but had become a public undertaking, that it was transferred from the world of commerce into the sphere of education and social welfare. This claim, however, did not entirely correspond to reality as the way the theatre was organised did not change fundamentally. The city took over the basic equipment and paid for heating and lighting. But the directors still had to take out a lease and were ultimately responsible for their business. They could not afford to run their own company, and over the years Münster's theatre entered into a number of cooperations with ensembles of other regional theatres to perform here (e.g. Essen, Bremen, Osnabrück, Krefeld and Elberfeld).

As an aside recent research has brought to light an interesting parallel with regard to the development of regional museums. They, too, often owed their foundation to middle-class associations and individual *Bürger*. Local museums in Münster, Bielefeld, and Dortmund, for example, at the turn of the nineteenth century were not in receipt of any state support. This involvement was only gradually forthcoming and had an immediate effect. In 1871 Westphalia had only six museums; by 1914, it had almost sixty.²³

²¹ See Michael Jeismann, "'Bürgerliche Kultur' und Kultur des Bürgertums – Theater und Museen im 19. Jahrhundert," in: Franz- Josef Jakobi (ed.), *Geschichte der Stadt Münster* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1994), vol. 2, 497.

²² In 1911 the city paid M 88,126 to the theatre (see Anton Prah, *Die eigenwirtschaftliche Tätigkeit der Stadt Münster in Westfalen* (Diss. University of Münster, 1936), 34).

²³ Gisela Weiss, *Sinnstiftung in der Provinz: Westfälische Museen im Kaiserreich* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2005), 27. See also Pielhoff, "Bürgerliches Mäzenatentum".

Theatre Repertoires

With regard to repertoire, too, German regional theatres at the turn of the nineteenth century hardly reflected claims that they were places of 'high' culture, educational institutions, and 'temples of the muses' – claims these theatres even raised themselves. An inscription on the façade of Dortmund's theatre read 'Never must the striving city dispense with the ennobling arts. An appreciation joyfully embracing sacrifices built the muses this home.'²⁴ Claims such as these demanded programmes dominated by the mighty classics and modern drama alongside contemporary avant-garde fare and some civilised comedies. Musical theatre would be represented at such theatres as a matter of course, with works by Mozart, Wagner and Verdi, but certainly no musical comedies, revues and farces. Interestingly the civic authorities and bourgeois audiences in the different cities generated demands on the theatres that were quite similar: the canon required was to be worthy of a 'representative' theatre with grand opera and uplifting drama. These demands, however, cast first doubts on the assumption formulated above, and in particular regarding avant-garde drama. And, indeed, repertoires were conservative rather than revolutionary, conventional rather than experimental – even during the Weimar Republic and in contrast to claims by many scholars who make no distinction between avant-garde experiments in Berlin and the often anti-modernist attitudes in the provinces.²⁵

But even the claims of a 'representative' stage did not quite relate to the actual fare produced. Classical drama, for example, occupied an important but not a prominent position. A typical regional theatre would produce an average total of about twenty-five plays each season, only five or six of which would be classics: one or two plays by Shakespeare, one or two by Schiller, one by Goethe or another German classic (often Hebbel or Kleist), and sometimes Calderón, Goldoni or Molière. Moreover attendances at these productions were considerably lower than at other more entertaining shows. In fact repertoires were dominated by comedies, farces, thrillers and other purely amusing pieces. They made up at least a third of all the

²⁴ My translation of "Nimmer entbehre die strebende Stadt der veredelnden Künste. Opferfreudiger Sinn baute den Musen dies Heim."

²⁵ The theatrical avant-garde was concentrated almost entirely in Berlin and hardly reached out to the provinces (for a different interpretation see Walter Lacquer, *Weimar. A Cultural History 1918-1933* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1974), 140-154). One example of prevailing conservative attitudes in the provinces affected Brecht's drama, which, apart from some exceptions, was thoroughly avoided. Although Münster produced the *Threepenny Opera* during 1929-30 it failed disastrously and was only performed twice. Generally it was not until the late 1960s that Brecht's plays experienced successful runs in the provinces. See also Karl Christian Führer, "Pfui! Gemeinheit! Skandal!" *Bürgerlicher Kunstgeschmack und Theaterskandale in der Weimarer Republik*," *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* 57 (2009), 389-412.

productions.²⁶ This prominent role not only contradicts contemporary as well as recent claims regarding theatre programmes being dominated by 'high culture', it also represents an interesting parallel to Yorkshire. Even twenty years later (in the early 1930s) the Ruhr theatres were still dominated by entertainment and staged numerous comedies by British dramatists, among them Brandon Thomas, Edgar Wallace, Arnold Ridley, William Somerset Maugham, Frederick Lonsdale, Noel Coward, and St John Ervine. Given these points of contact it even seems fair to assume that apart from one or two classics and some contemporary dramas, repertoires at the Ruhr theatres would have been successful in Yorkshire, too.²⁷

Similarly, the musical repertoire was not all Wagner and Verdi either – far from it. Although regional theatres aimed high and regularly attempted Wagnerian operas, or even the full Ring cycle, their attempts were rarely rewarded – neither by their own standards nor by the local press. The musical repertoire was traditional and modern 'experiments' were avoided.²⁸ On average the operatic repertoire at regional theatres consisted of ten to twelve operas per season (if they had a resident opera ensemble, otherwise these performances would be provided by visiting companies, mostly ensembles of other bigger regional theatres like Cologne or Düsseldorf with which the Ruhr playhouses entered into fixed agreements). Although theatres presented Wagner, Verdi and Mozart they largely concentrated on lighter fare by Puccini, Rossini, Bizet, Lortzing, Leoncavallo, and Offenbach. Contemporary works hardly featured at all and if they did, their success was minimal. In any case, they only stood a

²⁶ The most successful playwrights of this genre during the Weimar years were Curt Goetz, Carl Laufs, Franz Molnar, Bruno Frank, Ludwig Hirschfeld, Max Bertuch, Laszlo Fodor, Toni Impekoven, Ludwig Fulda, August Hinrichs, Leo Lenz as well as the duos Arnold/Bach and Bernauer/Oesterreicher.

²⁷ In 1931-2, for example, Münster produced four classical dramas (two by Goethe and two by Schiller), which might have been regarded as too 'heavy' in Yorkshire. The two right-wing plays *Warbeck* and *Flieger* might have been equally problematic. The seven modern classics by Ibsen, Hauptmann, Halbe, Schönthan, Meyer-Förster and Schönthan/Kadelburg, however, would certainly have been appreciated by Yorkshire audiences. Meyer-Förster's *Alt-Heidelberg*, after all, had been turned into *The Student Prince*, one of British theatre's biggest popular hits. The twenty comedies would certainly have been equally successful in Yorkshire, and the large musical programme with twelve operas and fourteen operettas would have been admired there. German-style operetta at that time experienced a short term revival in London, which had its implications for the provinces, too. Especially famous was *White Horse Inn*, which, coincidentally, was staged in Münster in 1931-2 in its German original as *Im Weißen Rößl*.

²⁸ In Münster, the first production of Richard Hagemann's *Die Tragödie von Arezzo* in 1932 was as much an exception as the performances of Ermanno Wolf-Ferrari's *Sly/Big* during 1929-30. See also Dörte Schmidt, Brigitte Weber (eds.), *Keine Experimentierkunst: Musikleben an Städtischen Theatern der Weimarer Republik* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1995); Michael H. Kater, *The Twisted Muse. Musicians and their Music in the Third Reich* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

chance of more than one performance if they featured a late romantic rather than a truly modern score.²⁹

Also, the mainstay of the musical repertoire was not opera but operetta. Although the number of operas and operettas produced may have been similar, operettas regularly reached double the performances in a repertory system, which allowed some flexibility to respond to audience demand. Whereas a typical opera production at the time received an average of six and a play of eight performances, the typical operetta ran fifteen times. Regular favourites were pieces in the Viennese tradition (Strauß, Lehár, Millöcker, Zeller), the Berlin school (Lincke, Künnecke), and contemporary works. These contemporary pieces, however, rarely reflected modern ideas in composing and stood in the tradition of the classical operetta. Even during the Weimar years operettas and musicals based on truly modern scores with either jazz or atonal 'experiments', such as the works by Krenek, Weill or Dessau, stood little chance of entering regional repertoires.

It is interesting to note that even during these allegedly experimental Weimar years in the 1920s the theatres in Yorkshire and the Ruhr were characterised by largely similar repertoires. Although Münster in the mid-1920s produced monumental Händel operas and staged some avant-garde dance performances, and Bochum organised its colossal annual *Festwochen*, these productions were the highlights of otherwise quite conventional programmes. Hardly any *Intendant* tried his hand at experimental pieces.³⁰ The pillars of German regional repertoires during the 1920s were not Shakespeare and Brecht but comedies and farces – as in Britain.

²⁹ Even in Berlin with its exciting experiments and variety of musical life the influence of reactionary forces was substantial and opera repertoires were much more traditional and conservative than some commentators have claimed (see Erik Levi, *Music in the Third Reich* (London: Macmillan, 1994), 1-13).

³⁰ For a typical account see Hans Schlaghecke, "Lage des Berufstheaters," in: Theater der Stadt Münster (ed.), *Almanach 1927* (Münster: n.p., 1927), 18-24. Schlaghecke demanded a new spirit, which denied utilitarianism, intellectualism and individualism in order to reach a unified national theatre true to its cultic roots. Experiments had to go as otherwise the theatre was in danger of being excluded from the 'living stream of blood' and would 'degenerate'. It is interesting to see how anti-modernist attitudes mix with proto-Nazi vocabulary in this article. Its incorporation in a book, which was designed to present the quintessence of Münster's theatre renaissance during the mid- 1920s, indicates how accepted these views were. In similar articles commentators criticised Max Reinhardt's experimental stage designs (see Josef Bergenthal, "Bühne und Publikum," *Blätter des Theaters* 4 (1927/28), 98), expressed their disgust at plays about adultery (see Wilhelm Heising, "Die Gesellschaftsstruktur der heutigen Zeit," in: *ibid.*, 126), and warned against modernist approaches in general (see Wilhelm Heising, "'Klassikertod' und Zeittheater," *Blätter des Theaters* 5 (1928/29), 144-145).

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, and perhaps surprisingly, the theatres in Yorkshire and the Ruhr region at the turn of the nineteenth century show many similarities. German cities were still far away from subsidising the performing arts. To commit themselves to municipal playhouses was out of the question. Although many became increasingly prepared to offer limited financial help if yet another season had ended in financial loss, this change of attitude does not mean that cities came to pursue an active cultural policy; it rather meant agreeing to waive the cost of the lease in one-off decisions. That Münster, for example, was not interested in any long-term commitments is illustrated by the neglect of the old theatre building, the *Comödienhaus*, and its subsequent demolition. In Hagen, Bochum, Dortmund and Bielefeld the city authorities were only vaguely interested in the theatre and could only with some difficulty and after substantial capital investment from its citizens be persuaded to contribute to building costs. Like Wilson Barrett or Percy Hutchison German impresarios resembled business managers rather than the artistic directors they would later become. It was only after the First World War that German regional theatres were literally taken over by the local authorities – only from the early 1920s did a theatre system develop which differed more clearly from Britain.

Regarding architectural solutions, too, parallel developments between the two regions are obvious. In Britain the topography of entertainment changed substantially towards the end of the nineteenth century with theatres moving from back streets to occupying prime locations in city centres. Put into context Yorkshire's glorious Victorian theatres in size, splendour and stature resembled Continental state theatres more than what might commonly be expected of a playhouse in England's industrial north. In effect, the new municipal theatres in Dortmund, Hagen, Bochum and Bielefeld were very similar to their British counterparts – not only in their outward appearance as proud civic statements (and equally copying the famous state theatres in Berlin, Vienna and Munich) but also regarding the way they were organised. In fact none of them received any regular subsidies around 1900, most of them were built following the initiatives of bourgeois pressure groups, they were run as business enterprises bound to make a profit, and presented a repertoire dominated not by Schiller and Goethe but by operettas, farces and comedies.