Theatre in Nazi Germany

Theatre seems to have a past of changing with the politics of the time and this is no different for what happened in Nazi Germany. Although the arts did not disappear during Nazi rule, the fundamental purpose of the arts changed dramatically after the Nazi regime took over the Weimar Republic. While some “original” theatre took place behind closed doors, public arts, more specifically theatre, was all based on propaganda. But for the Jewish community, theatre acted as a way to work together and have a common bond; whether it be in the Cultural Society or inside of one of the horrid concentration camps.

From 1918 to 1933, the years before Hitler was in control, Imperial Germany had collapsed and was replaced by the Weimar Republic (Gutman 559). During its final years, the Weimar Republic was not economically stable and as a result, the people suffered. The artists, in particular, had a hard time financially. Since patrons of the past could no longer monetarily support the arts, the artists had to react quickly and make do with what they had in the best way possible. Emil Becker, the artistic manager of a theater in the Weimar Republic, “had to contend with the inflationary economy of the Weimar Republic and a shrinking budget… the number of new productions dwindled in number each season” (Gadberry 34). After years of disagreements and lack of experience, artists of the Weimar Republic eventually formed “artistic unions and professional associations” (Steinweis 9).

Each organization, which once flourished, had seen a serious decrease in membership through the Weimar Republic. For example, the German Musicians’ Association had 40,000
members in 1928, but after three years of suffering through the economic plights of the Weimar era the number of members sank down to 15,617 by 1931 (Steinweis 10). In terms of theater, there were two major groups in the Weimar Republic: the German Theater Association and the Society of German Theater Employees. These two groups worked together and signed an agreement stating that neither group could work with any other organization or in a theater not connected to the German Theater Association. The Society of German Theater Employees also saw a decrease in membership from 1928 to 1931, as they started with 15,300 but had only 6,100 three years later (Steinweis 11). Although membership was at an all-time low, Joseph Goebbels, the Reich Minister of Propaganda (Gutman 591) was pleased that the “cultural sphere” had already been coordinated, as the organization of separate groups of artists could potentially be useful to the Nazi regime (Steinweis 10).

In 1933, the Weimar Republic was no more and the Nazi regime was in control. Theatre, and the arts in general, underwent drastic changes throughout the Nazi era. Hitler had a strict opinion on what art should be like and “a major task of the National Socialist state would be to expurgate alien tendencies from German art and culture” (Steinweis 21). The Nazi regime had no interest in art that was not propaganda and worked hastily to purify the arts, blaming “Germany’s ills on what they saw as the artistic decadence of Jews and their negative influence on society at large” (Friedman 584). In May of 1933, Goebbels spoke to theatre producers on tasks of the German theatre stating that “Third Reich art was to be political, patriotic, and consistent with the philosophy of the ruling party” (Gadberry 9). New art forms had developed before 1933 and “cultural conservatives regarded the new forms as excessively intellectualized, aesthetically alien, un-German…” (Steinweis 21). Hitler felt that it was the state’s responsibility to “prevent people from being driven into the arms of spiritual madness” and to uphold the cultural racial
elements (Steinweis 22). Glen Gadberry explains why Adolf Hitler was so driven to purify German theater:

Hitler felt the stage particularly prone to Jewish cultural assault because Jews were used to role playing in their “host” countries: acting was a learned survival skill. This proficiency at deception allowed easy entry to theatre, because, he assumed, most stage acting was merely imitation, without real invention. Acting was an ideal craft for a race without artistic talent. (4)

Creativity and personal inspiration was prohibited, and for the Nazi regime to be successful in creating the “art” as they wished, they had to “generate a purified group of artists” in which the “artistic capability was disregarded, inspired talent was expelled and true quality was silenced” (Zortman 7). Bruce Zortman explains in his book *Hitler’s Theater*:

Though shrewd and at times brilliant in their planning, the Nazis were unable to view art as anything more than functional. Assuming an “aesthetic” polarity opposing Surrealism, they demanded that all art, particularly dramatic art (theater, film and radio), would be purposeful with clearly delineated objectives that would unquestionably further the aims of National Socialism. They made no allowance for even peripheral artistic exploration and development for the sake of art itself. (6)

This does not mean that the production of theatre stopped or slowed down, it is just that except for the underground performances and those which took place in the concentration camps, the motives behind public performances changed and everything became regulated. Gadberry states that “the stage was systematically purged and replenished. New faces and forms sought to satisfy the major arts policies, coming from competing cultural bureaucracies” (2). From the
point when Hitler took power, theatres were forced to recognize the Nazi flag and they could show no empathy for the innocent victims slain by the Nazi regime (Gadberry 2). Steinweis states “For the national Socialist movement, artistic and cultural issues offered far more than a propaganda opportunity; they were central to the ideology” (21).

The Militant League for German Culture, formed in 1928, created the National German Stage Alliance in 1933. This “was an audience organization offering group-rate tickets to events” that were approved by the head of the League, Alfred Rosenberg (Gadberry 16). The membership of the league grew quickly, as the number went from 6,000 to 38,000 in only ten months of 1933. During the spring of that year, members of the League oversaw the seizure of the Association of Free People’s Theaters and the German Craft League (Steinweis 32). In Berlin, Hans Hinkel, who was head of the Berlin Chapter of the League, was appointed the head of the Prussian Theater Commission which dismissed all Jewish and other non-Aryan theater workers. In the end, Rosenberg’s leadership did not last very long, as by March of 1933, Hitler and his cabinet created the Reich Ministry for Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda, of which Joseph Goebbels would be the leader of (Steinweis 33).

Goebbels and his Ministry for Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda facilitated the Thingspiel movement as a “ facet of high-level manipulation” by sponsoring the Imperial Organization of Open-air and Community Theater (Eichburg). Goebbels made Otto Laubinger the president of both the association and the National Theater Board while Dr. Rainer Schlosser was appointed the Chief Dramaturgist for the National Theater Board (Zortman 30). The Thingspiel movement was based around cult plays, mostly for Hitler youth, and had “a rigid structure and content that was easily repeatable by merely substituting a new title and different names for the characters” and “dramatically speaking, it offered little or nothing of value”
Each cult play exhibited military ornamentation and impressive spectacle; “flaming torches, richly braided uniforms, thousands of voices chanting in unison, and a drummed cadence” all took place inside one large auditorium. The audience chanted along with the performers, since “obviously the primary purpose of this cult theater was to create an atmosphere of absolute uniformity, the method by which National Socialism could function most efficiently” (Zortman 12).

Schlosser’s plays were divided into four parts: “an oratorio or a program of recitative choruses… a presentation of allegorical tableaux vivants by an “Action” rather than a recitative chorus followed by a presentation of colors and pledges of allegiance… a pageant parade… a ballet, expressionistic dancing…”(Zortman 36). Although this did not have the normal structure of a drama, Schlosser defended his prototype by claiming that “art cannot be kept in bounds” (Zortman 36). Another prominent playwright was Kurt Heynicke, the writer of Nuerode: Ein Spiel von duetscher Arbeit (A Play of the German Worker) which was the only play that was “allowed to bear the name Thingspiel” and “a breakthrough of the artistic revolution” (Zortman 49). Zortman includes several excerpts from the play, including the following:

One: Atten…tion! / All: Atten…tion! / One: Forward, march! / All: Forward, march, working man! / One: Close the ranks!/All: Close the ranks!/You shall be all Germany./Where one sows the young seed,/Where one mows the ripe grain,/where on drives the wheel and rod,/Where one nails, another writes-/The lofty brow, the mighty fist./Stand up, when the oath clearly peels:/The road is very rough/As our steps go to the mine,/We are eternally united,/All Germany marches too! (49)

Another powerful aspect of the Thingspiel movement was the amphitheater, or Thingplatze, that the cult plays were performed in. In pre-Christian times, councils were held on
sacred ground near the graves of warriors. The Nazis had planned to build 400 amphitheaters at the sites where the councils were held, although there was no evidence these sites existed where the Nazis built (Zortman 13). Throughout 1934, the Nazi state had built 66 Thingplatze (Eichberg). Schlosser had made it clear what he wanted to open-air theater to look like: he wanted there to be no division between audience and performer; he also wanted the “landscape to be visible on all sides to form natural scenery” (Zortman 66).

This does not go to say that this was the end of Jewish people in German theater altogether. In 1933, the Kulturbund Deutscher Juden, or the Cultural Society for German Jews, was thought up by the theater director Kurt Baumann and was supervised by Hans Hinkel (Gutman 843). The Kulturbund would allow the Jews to continue on with the cultural life they knew so well and to help the Jewish artists who lost their jobs when Hitler first gained control (Gutman 844). Hinkel liked the idea of the Kulturbund because “it encouraged Jews who had been dismissed from state cultural institution to seek employment with the new Kulturbund rather than with private theaters…” (Steinweis 120). Hinkel was also keen on the fact that a Jewish organization would help out with German propaganda and of course, Hinkel wanted to make himself more powerful (Steinweis 121). The primary purpose of this group was to “provide employment and to present challenging cultural events for its Jewish members” (Gadberry 142). Of course, the group had its restrictions placed upon it by the government and the Gestapo did not completely accept the existence of the Kulturbund (Gutman 844). For instance, in order to become a member, you had to be Jewish and the Jewish press was the only press who could report on the offerings and was the only way the group could advertise. Once a Jew became a member, they could attend up to three events each month, including a play or opera, a concert and a lecture. The artistic choices were put under strict censorship, so strict that
by 1938 “not one musical or theatrical work by non-Jewish Germans or Austrians was performable” (Gadberry 142).

In the book *Documents on the Holocaust*, there are two documents pertaining to the Kulturbund. One is a letter to Hans Hinkel giving permission for Jews to form the organization. The letter states “The main reasons for this [permission], apart from intentions connected with foreign policy, is the easier supervision and the concentration of intellectual-artistic Jews in an organization where Jews will “make art” only for Jews.” The writer goes on to state that the existence of the Kulturbund relies on the group’s ability to obey the rules set forth: group gatherings were not to be advertised publicly, specifically that any posters or announcements posted would endanger the existence of the group (Arad 67). The other document comes from the other side: the Kulturbund itself. It is an advertisement for the group, exclaiming that “The Cultural Association of German Jews needs you!” It is a recruitment poster, telling the people what the Kulturbund stands for; it describes what the program includes: music, theater, lectures, and art. The document states “The aim of our work is the cooperation of all those who take part, actively or passively, in Jewish cultural life, both artists and audience, and this can be achieved only if all Jewish organizations play their part” (Arad 68).

These advertisements must have had some success, as by April of 1935, there were thirty-six Jewish cultural societies made up of seventy thousand members under the Reich Association of Jewish Cultural Societies. The group was centered in Berlin, which helped “facilitate the rational use of the existing artistic resources and made possible the operation of a central professional training center” (Gutman 845). But in 1938, all of the regional societies lost any control they had as the authorities ordered the transformation of the Reich Association of Jewish Cultural Societies into one “umbrella organization” that would be in charge of all of the Jewish
cultural activities, including editorial offices of the only newspaper published by the Jewish community (Gutman 845). Although the Propaganda Ministry had just ordered Hans Hinkel to end the cultural activity, just two days later Hinkel got together with a group of Jewish leaders to order the continuation of cultural programming; this was such an important matter that “Jewish performers were released from the concentration camps to which they had been dragged only a couple of days earlier” (Steinweis 123). The few things that the smaller societies maintained were: “four theater companies, four symphony orchestras, a number of choirs, many chamber orchestras, entertainment groups and lecturers, and mixed groups” (Gutman 845). The Jewish culture and artistic life became much less important than before and the supervision of the societies became much more strict (Steinweis 123). The societies continued to keep up the spirits in the Jewish community, “the Kulturbund was a spiritual support of the German Jews, strengthening the ties of individual Jews with the Jewish people and with their faith” (Gutman 846).

Of course, the majority of the Jewish community was forced into the various concentration camps where “denial of artistic freedom coincided with the complete removal of basic human liberties” (Gadberry 157). But the artists who had to endure the awful life in a concentration camp did not stop pursuing their art, for it could be “perhaps only through art were the victims able to overcome, even momentarily, their existence” (Friedman 586). The artists during the time used whatever they could get their hands on and created art that “represents only an abstraction of the cruel reality” (Friedman 582). This longing to express oneself through art was no different for those practicing theatre. There were several forms of theatre throughout the different types of camps: in “model camps,” some operas were performed; in a camp in Belgium, prisoners who were practiced in theatre were allowed to put on “variety shows” on weekends;
some camps tried to encourage prisoners to play sports while others played music on the P.A. system. These actions, which may seem small to anyone in current culture, were huge in the attempt to “preserve some level of normalcy” and would help to “present a better picture of camp life and to diminish rumors of German atrocities” to the outside world (Gadberry 159).

While Hitler and Goebbels may have changed the purpose behind any public theatre performances in Nazi Germany, the arts played a major role in helping the Jewish community maintain a somewhat normal life and in keeping the Jewish culture alive during a time of suffering. The Jewish artists, while living through pain and torment, used whatever objects they could to express themselves. Theatrical Jewish community members, whether they were outside of the camps in the Kulturbund or being held hostage inside of a camp, carried on their existence through performance. Perhaps, as Gadberry states, “it may have been that theatre served in large measure as a form of escape from the harsh realities of everyday existence…” (165). Not only does this prove that theatre, and the arts as a whole, act as a crutch to any who are suffering; it also shows that while the purpose behind arts may change, the arts can never be completely silenced.


