

**West End and Friedrichstraße.
Cross-Cultural Exchange in Popular
Musical Theatre, 1890-1939**

Veranstalter: Research project 'West End and Friedrichstraße: Popular Musical Theatre in London and Berlin, 1890-1939'; Freie Universität Berlin; Goldsmiths, University of London

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The conference 'West End and Friedrichstraße: Cross-cultural Exchange in Popular Musical Theatre, 1890-1939' was organised by the research project 'West End and Friedrichstraße: Popular Musical Theatre in London and Berlin, 1890-1939'. A collaboration between the Freie Universität Berlin and Goldsmiths, University of London, jointly funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgesellschaft (DFG) and the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), the project focuses on popular musical theatre during the long turn of the century. The aim of the conference was to bring together scholars from a variety of disciplines working on operetta, musical comedy, revue, and on transnational cultural exchange, which was particularly important to these forms of popular culture.

A joint introduction by PAUL NOLTE (Berlin) and TOBIAS BECKER (Berlin) opened the conference. Paul Nolte situated popular musical theatre in the larger context of the history of popular culture and leisure. He also reflected on the transition from a traditional focus on the nation to one on transnational transfer. He valued the cross-cultural exchange in popular musical theatre as a vivid example of the way in which transnational connections and experiences moved 'in complex webs'. Tobias Becker argued that popular musical theatre and cross-cultural exchange have so far been neglected by theatre historians, particularly with regard to London and Berlin which are usually held to be less important in this respect than Paris or Vienna. In addition, Anglo-German contact was of heightened interest as the relations between these nations before the First World War are still

viewed largely in the light of a deep-seated antagonism. By focussing on cultural and metropolitan networks rather than the nation, he concluded, one might find examples to contradict this master narrative of rivalry.

The first panel of the conference dealt with the beginnings of exchange in European popular musical theatre. MARION LINHARDT (Bayreuth) started off by elaborating the distinct signatures of metropolises like London, Berlin, Paris, and Vienna in relation to transfer of popular musical plays and the history of operetta. She pointed out that London and America were influential in establishing new dance styles, rhythms, and forms of body representations. In contrast, Berlin and Vienna were dominant in the processes of transfer by standardising the production process and developing virtually an 'operetta business'. Linhardt suggested that operetta was constantly powered by the tension between international impacts and local conditions in the cities in which it was produced. These more general observations were complemented by STEFAN FREY (Munich) whose paper reflected on the 'translation' of selected operettas into musical comedies and vice versa. He, too, detected symptoms of an international influence and commented the importance of the local. Analysing the adaptation of „The Merry Widow“ in London, Frey pointed to the significant changes that were made to make the operetta fit the performance standards of the London stage as well as the expectations of the London audience. In the course of this transformation all aspects of performance, like music, libretto, dance and representation were subject to change. The issue of representing gender was taken up by VIV GARDNER (Manchester) in the last paper of this first panel which introduced the Sandow Girl: a female role model praised as being classically beautiful as well as healthy through regular exercise. Gardner argued that in a world of theatre where women dominated the performances, the body of the female performer functioned as a role model for the female spectator but, in turn, was fashioned by contemporary discourses about the female body itself. The Sandow Girl as an emblem for 'health and beauty' and occasionally as a trigger for comic takes on the 'figure

training mania' was one example of fashioned and fashioning female body images before the First World War.

The second panel moved on to the interwar period and to revue. It began with a joint paper given by CAROLIN STAHRNBERG (Klagenfurt) and NILS GROSCHE (Salzburg) who reflected on the reciprocal interactions between the popular musical stage, popular music and new media like recordings and the gramophone. The paper, and the subsequent discussion, underlined the importance of the impact of new technological standards on popular musical theatre, and vice versa. Recordings, produced in an artificial studio situation, differed from live performances and changed the expectations of the audience. Whereas American musical numbers or styles distributed through recordings 'jazzified' popular music played on the stage, the stage itself was an important medium for the promotion of new songs. Of similar importance was the process of interspatiality: songs going off stage onto the street to become popular hits. Many popular hits were written by Noël Coward: the topic of the following paper by ROBERT GORDON (London). Gordon stressed Coward's stand as an artist, who, with his 'comic demolition of affectation' and his merging of intellectual culture and popular art became an icon of fashion. Part of this was Coward's tempo of speech, an artificial feature of an artistic meritocracy but also a way to pay credit to the new age of technology and technical speed-up, thus representing a self-conscious modernity often found in artists of popular musical theatre. The discussion also raised the question of the target audience of this new brand of theatre. While some of the participants were of the opinion that popular musical theatre did not address specific classes and was as such truly popular, others argued that it was largely dominated by the lower middle-classes.

The day concluded with the presentation of the project 'West End and Friedrichstraße' by LEN PLATT (London), DAVID LINTON (London) and Tobias Becker. The research team explained the difficulties in establishing a convincing historiography for both London and Berlin and the problems in reconstructing the mechanics of transfer between these

two sites. By drawing on two examples of adaptation – the musical comedy „The Arcadians“ adapted as „Schwindelmeier & Co.“ in Berlin and the operetta „Filmzauber“ adapted as „The Girl on the Film“ in London – they also showed how plays underwent a fundamental process of cultural appropriation and what that tells us about differences and similarities between the giving and the receiving end of a cross-cultural transfer.

The second day of the conference began with a panel on 'Atlantic Traffic' encompassing both the export of European musical plays to the United States as well as the American influence in Europe. DEREK B. SCOTT (Leeds) opened the panel with a talk on the reception of German operetta in London and New York. According to Scott, German operetta revitalised the British interest in popular musical theatre and accelerated a cross-Channel and cross-Atlantic competition. The changes made when transferring operetta from Berlin or Vienna to London were not understood simply as adjustments but as improvements to the original aimed to demonstrate that English theatre could out-rival the continent. Although British as well as American critics often stamped continental operetta as being 'pretentious' and 'too serious' it was also said to be more refined than the English musical comedy. Aspects of this refinement, such as the waltz, were eagerly taken over. But Atlantic traffic was more than a one-way street as PETER BAILEY (Manitoba/Bloomington) demonstrated in his paper on the Americanisation of European popular musical theatre. Taking his cue from the successful London revue „Hullo Ragtime!“ he presented revues as glamorous, witty and realistic to the extent that they involved characters taken from real life and engaged in modernity and intermediality by incorporating music and technology from everyday-life into their shows. Moreover, the revues were staged as spectacular productions with women as their 'front and centre' and American music and dance, especially the ragtime, as essential features. The ragtime was seen as a symbol of the American threat by British moralizers who were disturbed by the wild otherness and strong sexualism of the dance. Yet, at the same time ragtime embodied the

pace and energy of modernity, its excitement and ambiguity. Ambiguity also characterised the European-American relationship – there was a strong resistance against Americanisation but at the same time Europeans admired American professionalism on stage and were fascinated by their music, style, and language.

The second panel of the day continued these themes by taking a look at 'Travelling Artists', starting off with a presentation by LINDA BRAUN (Baltimore) on black performers from America in Europe. Braun stated that black performers travelling through Europe were not an innovation of the upcoming mass media as was often argued. Instead she described the first musical written and performed by black artists, „In Dahomey“, as a critical comment on the minstrel shows that had been popular in America and Europe for the most part of the nineteenth century. However, European audiences mourned the lack of 'authenticity' as „In Dahomey“ did not give them the 'nigger performances' they expected but, rather a sophisticated musical show. The same holds true for the 'Four Black Diamonds', four black artists performing German songs in lederhosen – an image that became something of an emblem for cultural transfer on the conference. Although non-white performers were widely renowned for their performance skills the audience was little concerned with the performance and for the greater part expected the affirmation of pre-existing stereotypes. Also playing with exotic stereotypes was the revue „Tropical Express“, the subject of a paper by SUSANN LEWERENZ (Hamburg). Lewerenz focussed on how its German-Brazilian impresario, William Curt Doorlay, succeeded in an almost uninterrupted run by presenting his show to the propaganda ministry as a valuable agent for German foreign propaganda. Moreover, the ambiguous position of his non-white artists proved advantageous: while persons of colour suffered from racist exclusion in Nazi Germany, nevertheless, there remained a lingering demand for exoticism, which the show could fulfil. Given this pretext it seems less astonishing that this revue was finally not banned because of its international program – at least not officially – but because it returned from a tour through

Great Britain with some alterations in the performances that the propaganda ministry identified as representative of western show culture and therefore no longer suitable for the German stage.

Transnational relations were also characterised by frictions and the breakdown of exchange, which was the topic of the final panel 'Operetta at war'. Concentrating on German operetta during the First World War, EVA KRIVANEC (Vienna) demonstrated how the genre changed during the war. The outbreak of the war took most theatres by surprise, to which they reacted with quick alterations in the programme: the 1914 season opened everywhere with plays praising war, soldiery and patriotism. Theatres in London, Paris, or St. Petersburg ceased to play German operettas. In Vienna a Kálmán operetta, which presented warfare as a children's game was the most successful play of the first war season. However, war operetta came to an end by 1915. Instead, theatres opted for more melodramatic, romantic, and nostalgic operettas. A second interruption in cultural relations came with the rise to power of National Socialism in Germany. MATTHIAS KAUFFMANN (Munich) took the Berlin Metropol-Theater as a case study for popular musical theatre after 1933. Kauffmann drew attention to the connection between Hentschke – manager, director, and writer at the Metropol-Theater – and the Reichsdramaturgie. As documents from the Bundesarchiv show, Hentschke saw himself as a sort of 'chief ideologist of popular theatre', whereas the propaganda ministry demanded simple, entertaining, and non-political plays. Hence, as Kauffmann argued, Hentschke turned his propagandistic aspirations into more subtle strategies, such as mocking other cultures or the celebration of the German hegemony over other nations. The discussion further explored the politics of operetta with a special regard to whether it acted as a medium of propaganda or a means of evasion.

Overall, this interdisciplinary conference brought together researchers from various fields such as history, musicology, or theatre. Moreover, it united, for the first time, academics working on popular musical theatre

on both sides of the Channel, who usually focus on the cultural traditions of their respective nations. Unsurprisingly, the papers featured a great variety of approaches to address cross-cultural exchange in the theatre: some focussed on the adaptations of plays while others looked at more direct forms of exchange in the guise of travelling artists and a third group studied exchange on the level of songs and styles of music, dance, and staging. However, all papers drew attention to the scale of transnational exchange between 1890 and 1939.

Conference overview:

Introduction: Paul Nolte, Tobias Becker (Berlin)

Early Transfers

(Chair: Sven Oliver Müller)

Marion Linhardt (Bayreuth): Rethinking Histories of Operetta. European Genre Transfers in the 19th and Early 20th Century

Stefan Frey (Munich): How a Sweet Viennese Girl Became a Naughty Cosmopolitan Lady. From Operetta to Musical Comedy. A Paradigmatic Cross-Cultural Exchange in the Beginning of the 20th Century

Viv Gardner (Manchester): The Sandow Girl and Her Sisters. The Construction and Performance of the Healthy Female Body in Fin de Siècle Musical Comedy

Transculturality – Intermediality

(Chair: David Linton)

Carolin Stahrenberg (Klagenfurth), Nils Grosch (Salzburg): The Transculturality of Stage, Song and Other Media. Reflections on Intermediality in Popular Musical Theatre

Robert Gordon (London): Noël Coward and the Image of „the Modern“

Len Platt (London), David Linton (London), Tobias Becker (Berlin): Project Presentation: <<http://cms.gold.ac.uk/research/popular-musical-theatre/>>

Atlantic Traffic

(Chair: Klaus Nathaus)

Derek B. Scott (Leeds): German Operetta in the West End and on Broadway

Peter Bailey (Manitoba/Bloomington): „Hullo Ragtime!“ The Rise of Revue and the Americanisation of the British Popular Stage

Travelling Artists

(Chair: Kerstin Lange)

Linda Braun (Baltimore): Between „Negro Operetta“ and Yodeling in Lederhosen. Music Performances of Black Americans in English and German Theaters (1880-1914)

Susann Lewerenz (Hamburg): The Non-Stop Revue „Tropical Express“ in Nazi Germany

Operetta at War

(Chair: Hansjakob Ziemer)

Eva Krivanec (Vienna): Soldier Boys and Gipsy Princesses. Popular Musical Theatre in European Metropolises during Wartime, 1914-1918

Matthias Kauffmann (Munich): Operetta and Propaganda. The Politicisation of Popular Musical Theatre in the „Third Reich“

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