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In Lessing's Footsteps: Dramaturgy in Germany and Britain

Essay

Michael Raab

Dramaturgy: a German invention

- 1 No other theatre job attracts a similar amount of prejudices:

Dramaturgy today quite rightly is merely a vague and pale notion, an awkward term for the most useless of all theatrical professions. It is occupational therapy for people who lack the talent for acting, the imagination for directing, the lust for power to be an artistic director and the knowledge for every other occupation, be it costume design or stage carpentry. Even for the most well-meaning, dramaturgy involves the mediocre duty to write programmes or simply copy and paste them, cut schools editions, read manuscripts or at least return them by post and to present the public from time to time with an accidental jumble of plays masquerading as a carefully planned season. Dramaturgy thus would be the part of the theatre that is not scenic but mere paper, not vitality but bureaucracy, not joyful playing but archive work, in short: a sheer waste of time. (Hildebrandt 199f.)

- 2 This exhaustive negative blueprint even comes from a former holder of the position at the Berlin *Schiller-Theater*, Dieter Hildebrandt, so one can easily imagine how people who really don't like dramaturgs are talking about them. The quote is from Hildebrandt's biography of the profession's founding father: Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781), author of the *Hamburg Dramaturgy*, which collects Lessing's writings during his period at the short-lived Hamburg National Theatre (1767-1769). Lessing championed Shakespeare and attacked French classical dramatists like Racine and Corneille, whose reputation in Germany never quite recovered. His aesthetic choices were meant to influence the politics of the Hamburg theatre as well as the perception of its audience who got briefed and educated by the dramaturg. Additionally Lessing saw himself as an in-house-critic writing about every aspect of the theatre, down to

forthright opinions about the ensemble's abilities. To assess those in public did not exactly endear him to the actors and later dramaturgs accordingly avoided it.

- 3 Lessing was a playwright himself. His *Nathan the Wise*, *Minna of Barnhelm* or *Emilia Galotti* continue to be staples of the German repertory. *Minna* counts as one of the very rare German classical comedies and *Emilia* as an early bourgeois tragedy, dramaturgically following Diderot, one of the few Frenchmen Lessing cared for. Many later colleagues of his combined dramaturgy and writing for the theatre, but the German language distinguishes between a "dramaturg" and a "dramatist", whilst in France "dramaturge" applies to both fields of work. The French sometimes use an added "in the German sense" to make clear they are talking about dramaturgy. Lessing's 19th century successors in the German-speaking theatre often fought for a more artistically ambitious repertory and against trite comedies or boring historical costume dramas. If they were lucky, they got the chance to head a theatre themselves and run it on dramaturgical principles, like Heinrich Laube at the *Burgtheater* in Vienna from 1849 to 1867. Even he struggled to explain his profession. During his Viennese job interview with Count Schwarzenberg the aristocrat asked him: "What is dramaturg?" (omitting the indefinite article as if talking about something very indiscriminate indeed). Laube answered: "Your highness, nobody will be able to explain that to you in a few words." To his credit, the Count laughed loudly. (Laube 174) Job opportunities elsewhere were provided by the many tiny German dukedoms and earldoms. All had their own court theatre combining drama, opera and ballet under the same roof, including an orchestra.
- 4 This structure survives into the 21st century, and even cities with less than 100,000 inhabitants still have heavily subsidized theatres, receiving up to 80 or even 85% of their budget from the public purse, figures Coventry or Salisbury can only dream of. Those 145 theatres today fall into three categories: state, municipal or county theatres, all of them with a dramaturgical department of their own. The federal state as such does not finance any theatre directly and state theatres are bankrolled by the 16 counties. Municipal theatres get funded by their cities whilst county theatres have a permanent base in a town but also tour regionally. Even those may be equipped with a higher subsidy than the Royal Court in London. The private sector appears negligible in comparison and only plays a modest role in major cities like Berlin, Hamburg, Munich or Stuttgart. The various organizational forms and local traditions demand different kinds of dramaturgy, and beginners hope their career will lead them from a county theatre to a municipal one and eventually to a prestigious state theatre. In contrast to Britain and France, where everybody yearns for London and Paris as the undisputed artistic capitals, Berlin theatrically is far from being that, and the regions often can be artistically more interesting, as was the case with first Ulm and then Bremen as the leading theatres in the 1960s. The equivalent in Britain would have been the Bolton Octagon outdoing the National and the RSC.
- 5 Berlin used to be more dominant at the end of the 19th century and during the Weimar Republic. Dramaturgical developments went hand in hand with formal innovations in writing only possible in new organizational models. The plays of a socially critical writer like Gerhart Hauptmann were too much even for adventurous court theatres like the one in Meiningen where the ruling duke was his own artistic director and had dared to stage Ibsen. Hauptmann was "made" by Otto Brahm (1856-1912), the most important dramaturg of his time, although he did not even refer to himself as such.

Brahm started out as a critic before establishing the *Freie Bühne* (Free Stage), the German equivalent to André Antoine's *Théâtre libre* in Paris, J. T. Grein's Independent Theatre in London or the Moscow Arts Theatre. To avoid censorship problems, the *Freie Bühne* arranged one-off productions for its members in theatres rented for the occasion. In the autumn of 1889 Ibsen's *Ghosts* was followed by the world premiere of Hauptmann's *Before Sunrise*, which caused a huge scandal and established naturalism in Germany. When Brahm in 1894 took over the *Deutsches Theater* as artistic director, Hauptmann became its resident dramatist, and Brahm's own productions and those he advised on were characterized by a diligent dramaturgical reading. Similar to a predecessor like Laube, the repertory was his calling card, and the close working relationship with Hauptmann fulfilled a prerequisite voiced by the director Leopold Jessner: "It is the highest ambition of a dramaturg to discover a real poet or, failing that, at least a Lilliputian one." (Jessner 66) What made Brahm so exemplary was his ability to spot a whole new trend in writing and to create a fertile working relationship where naturalistic plays could blossom. When naturalism had its day, his own star was falling, too.

New developments during the Weimar Republic

- 6 Brahm oversaw productions in his theatre but was not yet a director in the modern sense of the word. Intriguingly this pioneering honour belonged to his successor at the *Deutsches Theater*, the Austrian Max Reinhardt (1873-1943). He had acted for Brahm and grown to dislike an aesthetics too grey and joyless for him, down to the frequent smell of cabbage he had to endure on stage in naturalistic plays. Reinhardt yearned for colour and a more extrovert playing style than Brahm's austere dramaturgical approach. While the latter in all but name was his own dramaturg, Reinhardt instigated a differentiation of the job profile basically still valid today. On the one hand he brought in dramatists like Bertolt Brecht and Carl Zuckmayer to work as dramaturgs what in their case meant writing and adapting plays. For a version of Goethe's *Faust I* he even hired a leading academic, the august professor of German literature, Erich Schmidt. On the other hand his "office dramaturgs" Felix Hollaender, Arthur Kahane and Berthold Held were responsible for the theatre's organization and public relations or the running of the acting school affiliated to it. The *Deutsches Theater* at the time was still a private enterprise (yielding enough to let Reinhardt buy a castle crammed with antiques in Salzburg) and competed in a crowded Berlin market. Its dramaturgs had to be adept at what the critic Herbert Jhering in 1927 summarized as

the ability to see a play already when reading it in all its roles and situations on stage, to imagine its scenic possibilities, to have a feeling for the exact point where its success may lie and to focus onto that point the whole propaganda and the preparatory tactics (Jhering 237).

- 7 Jhering, an early champion of Brecht, had a high opinion of dramaturgs not shared by many in the theatre. At the time, their most vociferous opponent was the director Jürgen Fehling (1885-1968). He banned dramaturgs from rehearsals and feared attempts to interfere with artistic proceedings:

I believe it is extremely rare that somebody really sees his job as a dramaturg as the summit of his aspirations, the best use for his talents and the most joyful way of exercising them. They all want to prepare and to influence actual playing (Fehling 78).

- 8 The role of the modern production dramaturg envisaged by Jhering was anathema to him. It is perfectly understandable, however, why he objected to a brand of dramaturg who longs to be a director himself and does not bother to hide this ambition when attending rehearsals. Fehling's view of the job rather conformed to an ironic description by Jhering's colleague Julius Bab:

Dramaturg is the name for a better sort of servant in the theatre, whose job it is to do what others regard as too unpleasant. He has to negotiate with officials and the press, with actors, agents and workers, get rid of annoying visitors and send back 300 plays per year with a standard letter and thirty others with a polite one. (Bab 145f.)

- 9 Thus the Weimar Republic already defined the contemporary contradictions of the position: either being a bureaucrat (the German theatre still has the job title of "managerial dramaturg") or actually initiating productions, advising on every artistic aspect of them and taking on the additional role of a first spectator at rehearsals. After the Weimar Republic's collapse, the Nazis redefined the dramaturg's task as one of ideological censorship, and Goebbels even employed the so-called "Reichsdramaturg" Rainer Schlösser who vetted the repertory of all the German theatres. Even without a Schlösser-figure at the helm, unfortunately the GDR after the war kept alive this ideological grounding of the job, particularly if you were chief dramaturg. Not only communist party officials but also the ensemble expected from your department "to show the way" politically. For the French director Antoine Vitez (1930-1990), who knew the Eastern European theatre very well, the dramaturg there was mostly a Stalinist cop ("un flic", Vitez 169). Luckily, the GDR not only stood for such prescriptive thinking. Brecht's Berliner Ensemble institutionalized a brand of production dramaturgy more comprehensive than the practice during the Weimar Republic. Brecht (1898-1956) thought dramaturgy relevant for all conceptual questions from the planning to the execution of a production. West German theatre makers looked on with envy, because there artistic directors in the 1950s and 1960s all too often indulged in Fehling's blanket contempt for dramaturgs. It was no coincidence that Peter Stein's *Schaubühne am Halleschen Ufer* in 1970 not only kicked off with Brecht's adaptation of Gorki's *The Mother* but also was strongly influenced by the Berliner Ensemble's dramaturgical model.

The 1970s as the golden decade of German dramaturgy

- 10 The 1970s marked a veritable heyday in various respects. Never before and never since were dramaturgs in such an influential position, as they helped to develop the intellectual concepts at the heart of German directors' theatre. Out went the dubious post-war approach of supposedly letting a play speak for itself, which all too often had resulted in hollow declamation on abstract sets. Directors like Stein were not only influenced by Brecht's materialistically grounded scientific background research but also by another Weimar Republic theatre maker who had returned from exile: Fritz Kortner (1892-1970), a former star actor turned director. Stein at the *Munich Kammerspiele* briefly worked as his assistant and always understood it as a badge of honour. Kortner re-interpreted classical texts in a dramaturgically revelatory way during unusually long rehearsal periods. His method was exemplified even in his very last production, a Viennese *Emilia Galotti* in 1970. For all too long Lessing's play had

been interpreted as bourgeois criticism of aristocratic sexual and moral licentiousness culminating in Emilia's father stabbing her. Odoardo Galotti's deed was due to her own wish rather to die than to be contaminated by the ruling Prince's degenerate surroundings. Kortner instead highlighted the emotionally stifling prudish bigotry of Emilia's family and fiancé. From a close reading of the text he gathered Emilia was actually in love with the Prince and that Lessing "almost reluctantly confirmed Emilia's feelings for him". (Nagel 2006, 116)

- 11 The rigorous re-reading of a classic became the aim of every reputable German dramaturg and made Peter Stein's *Schaubühne* the leading theatre of the time, not least because it had the best dramaturgs. With the help of Botho Strauß he directed Kleist's *The Prince of Homburg* as a dream-piece demonstrating how the author's hopes for a more humane Prussia never materialized and led to his suicide in 1811. Even more important was Strauß's role in Stein's *Peer Gynt*, an attempt at nothing less than an investigation of the whole 19th century, its economy, society, aspirations and life-lies. The company embarked on a thorough research rarely undertaken even by a university seminar. These ventures were organized by the *Schaubühne* dramaturgs and got documented in sumptuous programmes. None of them was more elaborate than the king-sized publication for *Peer Gynt*. It not only contained the complete version of the playing text and many production stills but also loads of background material and excerpts from the preparatory talks laying open the conceptual reflections of all those involved. The high level of debate manifest in these protocols was a yardstick for young dramaturgs elsewhere. Whilst Strauß increasingly turned to writing his own plays, his colleague Dieter Sturm became the leading example of the German dramaturg as a polymath, acquiring an almost guru-like status. People like Sturm often weren't public figures at all but still played an important role for the general intellectual attitude the most important German theatres had in the 1970s. He followed one of the profession's great unwritten laws: As a dramaturg you can achieve many things, as long as you do not plan to claim the credit for them.
- 12 From Lessing's, Laube's and Brahm's day onwards dramaturgy defined itself primarily through the construction of a repertory, the plays deemed central to it just as symptomatic as those studiously avoided. The European success of the *Schaubühne* naturally wasn't only due to its cerebral side, and productions like *The Prince of Homburg* or *Peer Gynt* also were feasts for the eye, starred actors like Bruno Ganz and became immensely popular with audiences. It helped that Stein left the structure of a play intact apart from judicious cuts and developed his interpretation without adding any external conceptual material. Just as Stein had Strauß and Sturm as his close collaborators, other German artistic directors of the period worked with long-term dramaturgs who wielded a programmatic influence unknown in Britain or the US. Jürgen Flimm was in tandem with Wolfgang Wiens in Cologne and at the Hamburg *Thalia Theater*, and Hermann Beil accompanied Claus Peymann from Stuttgart to Bochum and on to the *Burgtheater* in Vienna. Beil was a great mediator, a talent essential with an artistic director as choleric and unpredictable as Peymann.
- 13 The vital dramaturgical task to detect problems as early as possible and to diffuse them can't be taught but has to be acquired on the job. Beil's unconventional methods included baking reconciliatory cakes for the most ferocious squabblers and he even published his favourite recipes. Thomas Bernhard immortalized the dramaturg in a series of short plays showing him together with the blustering Peymann. Two of Beil's

editorial feats deserve an entry in the theatrical Guinness Book of Records: For Goethe's *Faust I and II* in Stuttgart in 1977 he produced a cassette containing five volumes adding up to 665 pages and for Grillparzer's *King Ottokar's Fortune and End* at the *Burgtheater* in 1991 a three volume set running to 650 pages. In Peymann's theatres you always got the version of the text complete with every minute cut diligently marked as well additional material, usually concerning the play's production history. Only rather slowly these male duos became less prevalent in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. Peymann apart from Beil started to work with Jutta Ferbers. In Zurich Christoph Marthaler had Stefanie Carp at his side and later Barbara Frey Andrea Schwieter. Frey's colleague Karin Beier employed Rita Thiele and Beate Heine as chief dramaturgs in Cologne and at the *Deutsches Schauspielhaus Hamburg*. In 2018 Anna Bergmann at Karlsruhe began with an all-female team of dramaturgs, and currently women clearly dominate the profession, albeit sometimes still with a male head of department. But female chief dramaturgs can also become artistic directors themselves, as was the case with Sonja Anders who in 2019 took over the *Schauspiel Hannover*.

The shifting power relationship between dramaturg and director

- 14 Irrespective of their gender, dramaturgs are always confronted with the dilemma that they need the trust of their artistic directors to let them construct a coherent repertory and to allow them to find the right director for each play. Already regarding the analytically brilliant Kortner, with whom he had worked at the *Munich Kammerspiele*, the dramaturg Ivan Nagel ruefully diagnosed: "Who directed like Kortner didn't need a dramaturg. And those directors who would have needed one, because they were too stupid themselves, unfortunately tended not to listen to a dramaturg." (Nagel 1999, 2) Nagel concluded dramaturgy was a job for subalterns and left it to become an artistic director in 1972. Not everybody in the profession seemed as prescient, and many rather naively assumed they could endlessly continue to reinterpret familiar plays. But in Germany with its many theatres churning out a multitude of productions, this process became inflationary and towards the end of the 20th century downright self-parodic. Even the cleverest dramaturg was unable to come up with any kind of convincingly new interpretation. Desperate attempts to prove the contrary ran into the additional difficulty that in the 1970s you could still presume theatregoers either had read *Emilia Galotti* and *The Prince of Homburg* at school or experienced them in more traditional productions. This was no longer the case in the 1990s and in the new century and resulted in bewildered reactions from spectators either unable to see what directors exactly reacted against or not even getting the hang of the plot. Plays now were radically deconstructed, rejigged and augmented with extraneous material. Visitors from abroad used to complain in the past that they didn't see a *play* in the German theatre but rather a *comment* on it. The current fashion even is to completely "overpaint" a text with rather broad contemporary brushes. Because in the process classical plays often are paraphrased in topical jargon, dramaturgs lose their role as defenders of a text devalued from day one.
- 15 The other problem Nagel had realized earlier than many of his more trusting colleagues was a shift in the balance of power. The more dominant directors became, the less inclined they were to let themselves be persuaded by dramaturgs to do a play

exactly right at this moment in time for a particular theatre. Sensing how artistic directors were keener to attract somebody with their market value than to stick to a coherent dramaturgical repertory, in major theatres directors could dictate plays which appealed to them personally and helped their own career. If they had the necessary bargaining clout, they even tended to enforce guest dramaturgs more loyal to them than to the producing theatre. The permanent dramaturgs there lost one of their main areas of conception that had been fundamental for their self-esteem. Dramaturgical overall planning remained possible only in smaller or medium-sized theatres where directors were not powerful enough to influence repertory decisions. But even there the trend to do more productions with fewer performances for a flat-lining amount of spectators led to poorer working conditions. Dramaturgs got less time to attend rehearsals, as they had to monitor more than one production simultaneously and were increasingly saddled with additional organizational tasks. Many recognized themselves in Julius Bab's description of the dramaturg as a better sort of servant doing stuff nobody else in the theatre was interested in. The opportunity for conceptual work on the scale of Strauß's and Sturm's in retrospect looked like a golden age.

- 16 As they so closely rely on a partnership with directors, the changes in that profession led to immediate consequences for the dramaturgs, too. Even though the classics had been recycled to death, many directors were not at all keen to deal with living dramatists who might in a bothersome way insist on actually seeing on stage what they had written. Instead, they turned to the adaptation of novels and film-scripts, which gave them more leeway and less authorial resistance. This opened up fresh opportunities for dramaturgs who either cooperated on the versions or did them on their own. Textual material an older generation of dramaturgs had printed in the programme now was spoken on stage as a commentary. In the 1970s no self-respecting director dared to do Molière's *The Misanthrope* without having read Norbert Elias's *The Court Society*, and it would have been the dramaturg's job to give advice about differences between French society in the 17th century and the period the production was set in. Now this kind of research went out of fashion, as many directors were prone to cut anything they thought irrelevant for today and themselves and set their productions indiscriminately in the present. Hardly anybody was still interested in recreating historical circumstances as Kortner or Stein had done, trusting their audience to draw their own conclusions about possible contemporary relevance. Many directors instead dismissed such elementary dramaturgical work out of hand and simply defined themselves as the *auteur* of the evening.
- 17 The most vociferous opponent of this development was the long-standing critic of the influential national daily, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Gerhard Stadelmaier, who (very likely to his own relief) retired in 2015. He coined the term *Regisseurstheater* to differentiate it from the previous *Regietheater*. The latter in German confusingly does not mean directors' theatre, as *Regie* stands for the production or *mise-en-scène* as such and can also refer to a *création collectif*. *Regisseurstheater* on the other hand indeed is the literal translation of directors' theatre. In Stadelmaier's opinion, the *Regietheater* predominant in the 1970s always fundamentally engaged with a play, even when reinterpreting it against the grain or contradicting it. The *Regisseurstheater* reigning triumphantly today for him appears solipsistic and self-indulgent, because the text is used only as a quarry for narcissistic purposes imposed on it. (cf. Stadelmaier 2016, 113ff.) He saw this process accelerating after reunification in 1989 with directors from the former East Germany as the main culprits, an attack that was far too generalized.

Regisseurtheater in Stadelmaier's definition conforms to the unjustly stereotyped polemic view of German directors' theatre upheld particularly in the Anglo-American scene.

- 18 Misjudged excesses by individual German directors often were used to tarnish the whole approach, although it actually had led to a number of seminal productions of classics and modern classics unequalled in Britain or the US. Admittedly there funds were significantly lower and rehearsal periods shorter but productions in any case appeared dramaturgically far less ambitious and adventurous. A Shakespeare, an Ibsen or a Chekhov in English-language versions for a German spectator frequently looked more blocked than directed. After four weeks of rehearsals these productions usually already went into a preview phase whilst in Germany there was another month left to really engage with a play in depth. After the first run-through the German production dramaturg's most important working session came when he sat down with the director to discuss what already had been achieved conceptually and what was still left to be done. On these occasions the dramaturg acted with more analytical distance than those involved with rehearsals on a day to day basis who might have begun to miss the forest for the trees. In a profession as vaguely defined as the dramaturg's, his or her experience objectively was able to be of help for a director who cared to listen during this decisive phase of work. Obviously, there had to be common conceptual ground agreed on during the preparatory period. And equally obviously, with an *auteurist Regisseurtheater*-approach, the German dramaturg's position is weakened from the start but intriguingly still the envy of colleagues abroad where the job developed in a completely different way.

German dramaturgical role models for Britain?

- 19 When a German dramaturg like Laube ran the *Burgtheater* or Brahm supported naturalism, the London scene was dominated by actor-managers who starred in long Shakespearean runs and looked for new plays only as personal vehicles. Dramaturgical work of any kind fell, if at all, to their wives. Florence Alexander was so fearsome, her appearance during final rehearsals earned her the nickname "the sledge-hammer" (Luckhurst 60). Actor-managers like her husband George otherwise only were afraid of persistently obnoxious authors, and employed play-readers to keep too pushy dramatists at bay. Whilst already Lessing's Hamburg venture had called itself National Theatre, serious British plans for one had to wait until the early 20th century and particularly the suggestions of Harley Granville-Barker (1877-1946). Himself a dramatist and director, he outlined preliminary English reflections about what a dramaturg should be there for. His thinking was influenced by Max Reinhardt's work and he had been involved with the director's London production of *Oedipus Rex* in 1912. From personal visits he knew the *Deutsches Theater* in Berlin as well as the *Düsseldorfer Schauspielhaus*. His concept for a National Theatre was half a century ahead of his time. The same applied to his models for script development. Frustrated by British parochialism, Granville-Barker almost emigrated to Germany but married rich instead and retired from practical theatre work to live in the US and France, where he translated plays and wrote his famous *Prefaces to Shakespeare*. Granville-Barker's dream of a National Theatre became reality only in 1963, albeit still with Laurence Olivier as an artistic director strongly in the actor-manager tradition.

- 20 With Kenneth Tynan (1927-1980) he employed the first permanent British dramaturg. Tynan had been the influential critic of the *Observer*, championing Brecht and the “angry young men”. Olivier’s third wife Joan Plowright convinced her reluctant husband Tynan would lend intellectual credibility to the theatre and as a bonus could be neutralized as a potentially dangerous opponent. Tynan understood his role as similar to the Berliner Ensemble’s dramaturgs, but the National’s board even refused him the coveted title “dramaturg”. So he became head of PR and “literary manager” instead, a term Granville-Barker and William Archer had already used in 1904 (Luckhurst 78) and which was accepted by Tynan as a compromise. It ties in with the French *conseiller littéraire* and the Russian *Savedujuschi Literatury* or *Savlit*, both putting a similar emphasis on the script side of the job and without equivalent in the German theatre. Tynan in an interview with *Encore* magazine even went much further back than to Brecht and evoked another ancestor:

That kind of intimate relationship, where Lessing was writing plays for the company, was employed by it and also reviewing it, is possible only when critics and management and actors and playwrights are all working towards a common artistic end. (*The Encore Reader* 301)

- 21 Unfortunately, this was a rose-tinted view of the Hamburg enterprise and remained a pious hope for his own future. Tynan in London fared scarcely better than Lessing had in Hamburg. The board saw him, too, first of all as a welcome PR-factor. Whilst German theatres at the time already employed full-time PR-representatives, Tynan apart from his dramaturgical activities had to take care of the National’s complete public presentation. Astonishingly he managed to conceive programmes, which for the first time in England deserved their name and were more than illustrated cast lists. He had a single assistant on a 50%-job, whose salary he topped up out of his own pocket to be relieved at least of some administrative burdens. In one respect he was better off than Lessing: The German didn’t have any direct influence on the repertory, but Olivier gave Tynan a relatively free hand in the choice of new plays, provided they weren’t too politically controversial. The board overruled him when Tynan tried to get Rolf Hochhuth’s *Soldiers* with its attack on Churchill produced. There were fewer fights over homegrown products by the likes of Tom Stoppard, however even letters of thanks appeared double-edged. After the opening of *Jumpers* in 1972 Stoppard wrote:

I think I am extremely clever to have written it, but it would not have got there I think without your intervention. Thank you for taking up the running when it mattered. You’ll never get the credit, of course, I’m glad to say. (Luckhurst 190)

- 22 Pertinently Tynan kept a sign by his desk reading: “Be light, stinging, insolent and melancholy.” Insolence didn’t go down well with directors who resented his wish to influence the production side of things. These attempts were still far from the German practice, as he wasn’t involved in the preparatory development of directorial concepts remaining alien to the vast majority of British directors anyway. But even his comments as a first spectator after a run-through were firmly rebuked as completely out of order by somebody like George Devine (1910-1966) during his production of Beckett’s *Play*. (Luckhurst 178ff.) If Tynan had published them Lessing-style, all hell would have broken loose on the South Bank. He paid a price health-wise, was increasingly isolated and quit in 1972 before Peter Hall took over from Olivier. Somehow Tynan ignored the fact that at the Berliner Ensemble there were completely different working structures, but at least in the wake of his example at the National, the Royal Court in 1979 and the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1981 also appointed

officially designated dramaturgs (Luckhurst 200). In contrast to Tynan they and their successors in the job sometimes were not at all keen on the title. Graham Whybrow, who was at the Royal Court from 1994 to 2007, even dreaded “using the D-word” (Luckhurst 120). He placed himself firmly in the literary manager camp as a developer of scripts. Only very defeatist German dramaturgs would have agreed with his standpoint:

I do not act as a production dramaturg in the continental sense: my rôle is to foster the relationship between playwright and director and I worry that the Brechtian model of the dramaturg is born of defensive cultures which perceive the need for radical intervention between the writer and the director: such models are built on the idea of parent-child or teacher-pupil relationships and suggest there are fixed sets of principles which can solve ‘problems’ in a play.

- 23 Quoting this astonishing statement, Luckhurst adds: “In Whybrow’s eyes, the more successful a writer becomes, the more redundant the Literary Manager should be.” (231) Unfortunately very successful playwrights can simply be extremely resistant to advice, particularly if they are spoilt by the adulation they receive at a theatre like the Royal Court. The actor Tom Hollander in 1997 not only called it “writer-led” but alleged the people in charge “occasionally make monsters out of their writers”. (qtd. in Christopher) Regarding beginners, Whybrow was proud that the Royal Court received ca. 3,000 unsolicited plays per year. Together with his small team and a roster of external readers he coped with all of them. This is one of the fundamental differences between the Anglo-American and the German theatre system where dramaturgs mainly deal with the existing repertory or finished new work. Only the GDR had specific positions as a “development dramaturg”.

Dramaturgs and new writing in Britain and in Germany

- 24 Whilst in Britain playwrights’ agents basically only take care of their clients’ contractual arrangements and the theatres directly work with them on their scripts, in Germany this is the job of the theatre publishers (*Theaterverlage*). The term is slightly misleading, as in many respects they are more agencies than publishers in the traditional sense, although big publishing houses like Suhrkamp, Rowohlt or Fischer run their own theatre departments. A number of the other *Theaterverlage* don’t publish anything in book form at all, only printed scripts for productions in the pre-digital period and now a PDF. However, apart from the money-side, the agencies read unsolicited scripts and then work with the writers on them, provided they buy the rights. This creates exactly the kind of filter Graham Whybrow so adamantly rejected. If as a German dramaturg you receive an unsolicited play, there can be only two explanations for it: Either the writer is so naïve he or she doesn’t even know about the existence of theatre publishers or the script has already been rejected by them. In my sixteen years as a dramaturg in various cities I didn’t get a single play worth considering for production through this channel, and only very rarely I told a would-be dramatist they should continue and find a theatre publisher. In contrast to Whybrow, needing time for production dramaturgy, I was only too glad that a major part of script-development was done by the publishers who then offer the performing rights to all the theatres in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. Thus a successful new play can be staged quickly after its world-premiere by other theatres as well. In Britain often it takes years before even originally well-received plays like Martin Crimp’s *Attempts on*

her life (1997) or David Greig's *The cosmonaut's last message to the woman he once loved in the former Soviet Union* (1999) are revived in London or the regions and many others merely get one production.

- 25 However, with two recent developments Germany and the UK strongly influenced each other. The more basic one happened in Britain where there was an increased need for dramaturgy on an institutional level, albeit still a long way from the around 600 dramaturgs working in German-language theatres. Mary Luckhurst in her book *Dramaturgy: A Revolution in Theatre* nevertheless talks of a veritable boom. For 2006 she gives the figures of nine full-time and sixteen part-time jobs for the sixty London theatres as well as eleven full-time and four part-time positions in the regions. (Luckhurst 200) Some of them even work as production dramaturgs with directors who are open to this kind of partnership, and Edward Kemp, Ben Power, Duska Radosavljevic or Adriano Shapiro have helped to popularize the job profile. Still Turner and Behrndt claim for the overall situation: "Apart from a few isolated examples, there is no established tradition of production dramaturgy in the UK—not, at least, of collaborators with that title." (146) Particularly suspicious are dramatists who fear for their own privileged cooperation with directors when a dramaturg gets too massively involved in the production process for their taste. And directors who, like Ian Rickson, see it as their prime motivation to become "invisible" when directing a world premiere (Spencer 1997), are not too keen on conceptual dramaturgical thinking. Therefore, quite a few of the newly created positions are in literary manager territory, sometimes combined with community outreach.
- 26 The reciprocal process occurred exactly in this area of new writing and had a lot to do with the international success of the Royal Court under Stephen Daldry's artistic directorship and with Graham Whybrow as literary manager. German dramaturgs attending this theatre's productions or its annual summer school recognized the potential of a kind of topical writing rather looked down upon in their own country where *Zeitstück* (period piece) was a derogatory term and dramatists rather tried to write for eternity. They also remained too far removed from the production side, if they at all bothered to attend performances in the medium they supposedly engaged with. For a dramaturg like Andreas Beck his visit to London proved an eye-opener. In retrospect, he says:

I was an assistant director at the Vienna *Burgtheater* in the early 1990s, when for the first time I realized why the author is in fact a vital part of the work in general and the production in particular. It may sound weird but until then a dramatist wasn't somebody I expected to meet in a theatre. The dramaturgs on the other hand were surrounded not only by an aura of aloofness but rather by one of complete remoteness. (Roeder and Zehelein 25)

- 27 At the Royal Court he learnt how a feeling for the *zeitgeist* in writing can actually help at the box office. The British in-her-face writers inspired him to look for unknown subject matter in German plays, too, and he tried to bring dramatists into direct contact with the theatre when he became a dramaturg at the *Bayerisches Staatsschauspiel* in Munich. A welcome fringe benefit for him was the fact that this new kind of text also necessitated fresh ways of directing and playing, an experience not dissimilar to Otto Brahm's more than a century earlier. At his next theatre in Stuttgart, Beck established a new writing project called "Poets into the theatre", handing out commissions on the British model. The first season of this venture in 1997/98 brought plays by Theresia Walser, Katharina Gericke, Roland Schimmelpfennig, René Pollesch, Moritz Rinke and

the Austrian Franzobel, all of them still going strong today. Beck established similar structures when he moved on as a dramaturg to the *Deutsches Schauspielhaus Hamburg* and during his artistic directorship at the small *Schauspielhaus Vienna*. There he went one step further and did only new work, following in the footsteps of the Royal Court, the Bush or Edinburgh's Traverse Theatre. This is no longer possible after he became artistic director of the *Schauspiel Basel* in 2015 and of the *Bayerisches Staatsschauspiel* in 2019 where he has to provide a more balanced municipal theatre repertory, but Beck's British experience continues to influence his dramaturgical thinking. The authors developed by him mostly are not particularly well known in Britain, as apart from occasional crossover effects through friendly working relationships like the one between the Royal Court and Thomas Ostermeier's Berlin *Schaubühne am Lehniner Platz* (the successor to Peter Stein's *Schaubühne am Halleschen Ufer*) far fewer German plays make it into Britain than vice versa.

Last exit Dover? British hit plays failing in Germany

- 28 Already someone like Edward Bond had earned substantially more royalties from Germany and France where he was more popular with dramaturgs than at home. The same applies to Simon Stephens or the late Sarah Kane who got almost sanctified in the German theatre. Other work does not make it at all across the channel, and this failure illustrates basic differences in the perception of new writing. Some of the biggest London hits aren't even translated into German. Cast-size did for Alan Bennett's *The History Boys* (2004) and Laura Wade's *Posh* (2010). *The History Boys* demands eight male pupils and *Posh* ten male students, a task not even the *Burgtheater* in Vienna with its huge ensemble can fulfil. And the German repertory system with a different production on show every evening makes it impossible to co-opt acting students for the purpose. Both plays also describe an educational background without equivalent on the Continent, in Bennett's case even backdated to the 1980s. Paradoxically writers like Bennett or Wade are punished for a sociological accuracy so detailed only spectators knowing England and its class system very well would be able to recognize and appreciate. Wade put three years of research into her play, which after its initial run at the Royal Court in 2010 got a second outing in the West End two years later and was filmed as *The Riot Club* in 2014. She even created a kind of private jargon for her students referring to the infamous Bullingdon Club at Oxford with David Cameron, George Osborne and Boris Johnson among its members. So her disappointment when losing out on those continental royalties was perfectly understandable. Even bigger names fare little better, as in Germany there is a widespread prejudice towards what is dismissively referred to as "glorified boulevard" ("Edelboulevard"). Therefore, British star writers like Tom Stoppard or Christopher Hampton with plays as different as *Rock'n'Roll* (2006) and *The Talking Cure* (2003) are treated by German critics as if they were dramaturgical hacks in dire need of some continental master class.
- 29 During the second half of the 1990s the wave of in-er-face-theatre had been so dominant that quiet and elegiac plays like those of Kevin Elyot didn't stand much of a chance. The same was true of his Irish colleague Conor McPherson's *The Weir* (1997)—in London vastly more successful than any of the blood and sperm-texts. Despite an impressive German premiere at Stuttgart it sank hardly leaving a trace. British dramaturgs often describe German productions as cold and afraid of the emotions Ian

Rickson's original Royal Court production so movingly created. Their German counterparts on the other hand rate *The Weir* or more recent London triumphs like Martin McDonagh's *Hangmen* (2015) as too static and paradoxically too well constructed. They know when they try to interest them, directors will be far from happy to deal with such a meticulously built play. On the contrary, they will miss gaps in the structure waiting to be filled with their own showmanship. Authors like Simon Stephens who are acutely aware of these circumstances do so well in Germany because they already reflect them in their own working process. He even wrote more "Germanic" when he knew a play of his was going to premiere on the Continent, as with Sebastian Nübling's productions of *Pornography* and *Three Kingdoms*. The former in Sean Holmes's version at the Traverse in 2008 was a mere recital compared to Nübling's the year before. Stephens often states in interviews how pleasantly he is surprised when a German director detects possibilities he has not envisaged himself. This is certainly a better approach than the narrow-mindedness of some of his colleagues. German dramaturgs always have to explain to British authors why it's sensible to give directors on the Continent a bit more freedom than at home if they want to have their work produced and that threats of injunctions will only lead to nobody bothering about it in the first place.

A new post-dramatic orthodoxy?

- 30 British dramaturgs vice versa are sometimes baffled why Germans in their conceptual thinking look down sniffily on English-language plays avoiding the meta-theatrical approach so prominent in their own country. The playwright Mark Ravenhill, who regularly attended the Biennale festival for new European writing in Wiesbaden, summarized his experiences:

There's a huge range of ideas as to what a play is. For many of the writers from German-speaking countries, the so-called post-dramatic theatre (theatre writing without any semblance of character or narrative) has become de rigueur. These authors seem bemused by the naturalistic detail and demotic dialogue employed by the young British writers. Meanwhile, writers from the eastern bloc are writing in a realistic manner for the first time, free from the political repression that led previous generations to use metaphor and fable. (Ravenhill 2008)

- 31 Particularly in the dramaturgy departments of some German universities any attempt at unmediated representation is not only frowned upon but severely attacked. A typical example for this kind of debate arose around the publication of a book by the dramaturg and professor at the Ernst Busch acting school in Berlin, Bernd Stegemann, with the title *In Praise of Realism*—something British literary managers rather don't have to praise specifically. Quickly Nikolaus Müller-Schöll, who at the Goethe University Frankfurt is responsible for the training of dramaturgs, stated categorically: "[T]here is no way back to the time before the crisis of drama and representation without employing arty-crafty and subaltern means" (Müller-Schöll 56). This is what the successor of the leading post-dramatic theoretician Hans-Thies Lehmann is teaching his students who then become dramaturgs at theatres where audiences very likely would not at all mind a bit of "representation" on stage. Lutz Hübner, the most-performed living German dramatist, does not write post-Elfriede Jelinek "reams of text" ("Textflächen"), but positively old-fashioned British well-made plays on topical issues. Drama students and academics ignore him, whilst many theatres know doing his

work guarantees them an audience no post-dramatic text would remotely reach. In all the numerous post-show discussions I had as a dramaturg I didn't encounter a single spectator who claimed not to be interested in character or narrative. Had I upheld this view myself during a panel discussion at the annual meeting of the German Dramaturgical Society, I would have been laughed off the podium.

- 32 Since Lessing's day German dramaturgs routinely get involved in a kind of ideologically fundamentalist debate looking rather esoteric from an Anglo-American perspective. They could afford to indulge in such high-falutin' positions because they were protected by generous subsidies. Already before the Covid-19 pandemic unfortunately German theatre lost the cultural hegemony it enjoyed in the 1970s. Sometimes it gives the impression that it thinks it has to become ever louder and shriller in order to be heard at all. Or it does not even any longer define producing art as the prime reason for its existence, nudged by politicians like the social-democratic Lord Mayor of Frankfurt, Peter Feldmann. He regards

cultural politics as the more successful the more it understands itself as education and a lubricant for social infrastructure, promotion of trade and industry, a motor for integration, as city development and as a prevention service; in short, by taking into account aspects which are not established art" (Stadelmaier 2013).

- 33 The dramaturg Marion Victor of the Frankfurt theatre publisher *Verlag der Autoren* was horrified to be seen as a mere lubricant for social processes and to have art either devalued to a simple location factor or branded "elitist". (ibid.) But others eagerly jumped on Feldmann's bandwagon and appeared glad to be able to claim a non-artistic justification for their subsidies. Art itself for some German theatre practitioners has become a derogatory term. Matthias Lilienthal from 2015 to 2020 was artistic director of the *Munich Kammerspiele*, where Peter Stein learnt his craft with Fritz Kortner. He counts as an outspoken opponent of any kind of literary theatre and infamously referred to Chekhov as "arty shit" ("Kunstkacke", Höbel 2015). Lilienthal used to be a dramaturg and festival director and from 2003 to 2012 successfully ran the *HAU (Hebbel am Ufer)* in Berlin. One of its three playing spaces is the former *Schaubühne am Halleschen Ufer*. Shows in this venue for devised projects are certainly a million miles away from Peter Stein's all too reverential Stanislavsky-imitating productions of *Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchard* at the new *Schaubühne am Lehniner Platz*, but those said more about Stein's waning directorial powers than about Chekhov's value as a dramatist. The trend in German theatre is away from dramaturgically thinking artistic directors defining themselves through a repertory of plays to curators like Lilienthal, importing structures and aesthetic forms from the independent scene. The model established by Lessing 250 years ago only survives in smaller regional theatres and will be on the way out, if there isn't a rather unlikely decisive swinging back of the pendulum.

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ABSTRACTS

The first part of the essay outlines the history of dramaturgy in Germany and Britain, the second part deals with the different new writing policies there.

La première partie de l'essai revient sur l'histoire de la dramaturgie en Allemagne et en Grande-Bretagne ; la seconde partie traite des différentes nouvelles modalités d'écriture dans ces deux pays.

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