“The moment of seeing him again, the beautiful commotion when he finds his way back, when late and finally a voice is heard again that was removed through pure and grave injustice […]”\(^1\) With these words, theater critic Friedrich Luft celebrates Fritz Kortner’s return to the Berlin stage, on 1 February 1950, in a performance of August Strindberg’s *The Father.*\(^2\) Kortner, one of the most prominent actors in the Weimar Republic, had returned from exile two years before. However, the U.S. military fraternization law had at first prevented the Jewish-Austrian actor and director, now a U.S. citizen, from appearing on the stage of the former enemy.\(^3\) This was much to the dismay of Kortner, who, according to his memoirs, had come back to Germany precisely in order “to fraternize”\(^4\) and with high hopes centered upon rebuilding theater there.\(^5\) Luft’s review suggests that the Berlin audience was thrilled to have Kortner take part in this process. “The first
words of the dialogue are swallowed by the nearly feverish expectation,” Luft writes about the Father performance:

Then, the chunky, unmistakable figure slowly makes his way to the front. And now the audience breaks into cheers of welcome, an applause of such affectionate power as has never been heard in this theater with greater justification. [...] As the first greeting that hits one of the most pronounced actors of our epoch, it is meant to be unambiguous and persistent in its joyful power.6

However, although Kortner would know much critical and commercial success throughout the post-war years, the public’s enthusiastic reaction is misleading. Only a few months later, in December 1950, the Berlin audience showed a completely different face when confronted with Kortner’s production of Schiller’s Don Carlos. Even Friedrich Luft, whose reviews of the director’s and actor’s work are generally favorable, paints a sinister picture this time, calling the production an “unfortunate evening, interrupted again and again by half-hearted or outright manifestations of protest against the strangely distorting performance.”7 During Act V, actors dressed as soldiers in black fired in the direction of the audience: “Rightly, the terror amongst the spectators grew real and loud, so that calls for cancellation blatantly arose and quite a few women fell into fits.”8 Ernst Schröder, who played the part of Domingo, recalls shouts from the audience such as, “We want to see Schiller, not Kortner,” and “He’s shooting us! Jew!”9 Kortner himself mentions the production only in passing in his first autobiography, Aller Tage Abend (The End of All Days, 1959) but gives it some room in his second—less known—memoir, Letzten Endes (After All), which was published posthumously in 1971. There, Kortner explains the tensions in the audience with his own presence on stage (in the role of King Philipp), rather than with his directorial style, although in conjunction with the latter:

6 Luft, 94.
7 Ibid., 119. Luft’s Don Carlos review first appeared in the Neue Zeitung 5 December 1950.
8 Ibid., 119.
9 Ernst Schröder, Das Leben—verspielt. (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 1978) 103–4. It is believed that the salvos were not supposed to have been fired in the direction of the audience but that the revolving stage was mistakenly stopped too soon. See, for instance, Klaus Völker, Fritz Kortner: Schauspieler und Regisseur (Berlin: Edition Hentrich, 1987) 239.