When the book *1914–1918. L’autre front*, edited by Patrick Fridenson, was published in Paris in 1977, the concepts of social history had only begun to challenge a merely military history of wars in general and of the First World War in particular. Here, the other front, the home front, was conceived as a world of labour and a war economy that sustained the military effort. The First World War henceforth appeared as a war where the industrial complex and the economical strength of a nation at war were as decisive as the military achievements.

With the cultural turn in the 1990s, the home front in its multiple facets – from the discourse of ‘total war’ to the history of leisure and everyday life – moved to the centre of interest in the history of the First World War. In a multitude of case studies, the different experiences of war, both by civilians and soldiers, were explored, following the scattered traces of everyday life in wartime. The First World War was now seen as the first “total war”, as a war where “whole nations became integrated fighting units”, where nationalist ideologies and various forms of propaganda played a major role in keeping up the people’s will to persevere, where everyday life as a whole was “refracted” through the lens of war, as Maureen Healy has brilliantly shown in the case of Vienna. Shopping, cooking, child-rearing, reproduction, homework, leisure or neighbour relations were no longer considered to be private but became a matter of state, a matter of war effort.

By now, the statement that, from 1914 to 1918, war did not only take place on the different fighting fronts but also on the home fronts has become a
platitude: but one that remains true and opens up a great number of new paths for research. And in my discipline of theatre and film studies, research on entertainment in wartimes – raising questions of the aesthetic and political dimension of popular culture – has only barely been explored so far. In this article, I will concentrate on live entertainment, but leave aside the fast-growing aspect of cinema in the urban entertainment sector, simply because this would be too much for one article.

In the European metropolises, live entertainments such as music hall or variety shows, operettas or comedies, circus or fairground attractions were, from the late 19th century onwards, a very popular and flourishing part of urban leisure, a prospering sector of cultural production, and an essential feature of modern metropolitan life.

In spite of the “theatre crisis” constantly proclaimed from all sides, the presence of theatres of various kinds and their importance in terms of numbers of spectators was probably never as high as at this moment.\(^5\) Visits to the theatres and other public places of entertainment became more and more integrated in the everyday life of large parts of the population – with all the remaining distinctions between the classes – as leisure time was extending step by step (or struggle by struggle). Entertainment theatres were at the origin of the establishment of urban mass culture in the European metropolis.\(^6\) These entertainment theatres – and their most popular genres around 1910, the operettas, boulevard comedies, farces, different types of revue, music hall and variety shows – entertained strong links throughout Europe, and the cultural exchange in terms of circulation of plays, music and artists was very lively. It often only took a few weeks from the creation of a French play in Paris to the premiere of its adaptation in another city. In this sense the theatres contributed to the building of a specifically urban, cosmopolitan and transnational cultural identity of big European cities.

After a relatively short period of shock in the fall of 1914, most entertainment venues in the European cities reopened their doors and were highly frequented throughout the war years. Their programs and spectacles, however, changed significantly from the pre-war entertainment. In the first months a wide range of quickly written or adapted patriotic “war plays” in all popular genres from comedies, farces or melodramas to operettas, revues and music hall shows were staged on the home front of both sides, as one part of a spontaneous
