This essay examines the way in which ‘new’ English drama was adapted for the German stage: Samuel Beckett’s theatrical productions and Peter Stein’s staging of Edward Bond’s Saved provide the starting point for an examination of Simon Stephens’ contemporary plays from Pornography to Three Kingdoms. It is argued that Germany’s reputation as ‘director’s theatre’ has been set against that of Britain as a ‘playwright’s theatre’. The analysis suggests that Stephens’ work has not only restored the writer’s position on the German stage, but that German directors have also helped to develop Stephens’ dramatic approach.

The German theatre has a long established reputation for bringing new foreign plays to the stage, starting of course with Ibsen’s naturalistic work, which was disparaged or even censored in his Scandinavian homeland, and continuing with Strindberg’s later expressionistic plays. While premiered at the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen in 1879, A Doll’s House gained its reputation from the German 1880 production starring a well-known actress, Hedwig Nieman-Raabe, while Ghosts was first performed – to great scandal, which established it as a major work of modern drama – in 1886 by the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen; and Hedda Gabler was also first performed in Germany (at the Königliches Residenz-Theater Munich) in January 1891. Ibsen, indeed, remains a major icon for the German stage, although significantly, current productions – as with Ostermeier’s Hedda Gabler at the Schaubühne in 2005 or the Vinge-Müller versions of A Doll’s House (Hebbel am Ufer, 2009) and most recently John Gabriel Borkman (Volksbühne, 2012) – are radical and highly interpretive. They bear little relationship to Ibsen’s original texts, and signal the degree to which theatre in Germany has become the director’s field.

Expanding performances to eighteen hours or even a full week, as Vegard Vinge and Ida Müller have done demonstrates at an extreme the extent to which in much recent German theatre physical presentation is superimposed on a playwright’s text; and in their productions this is emphasized further by a continuous musical background (typically Wagnerian) which imposes a dance-like and extended choreography. At the same time, their simplistic, trash-pop art settings expose the connections between Ibsen’s naturalism and contemporary bourgeois materialism – possibly building on Walter Benjamin’s theory of the revolutionary significance in children’s art – while their white-faced zombie-like acting and
gore-stained intensification of Ibsen's internalized violence serve as an iconic display of the psychological effect of modern capitalism. This powerful and brutalizing re-presentation of classically modernist plays from the turn of the nineteenth century may be a highly effective transformation of Ibsen's work into contemporary, politically relevant statements that also stylistically, through the use of clichés, parody, and obvious fakery, establishes a symbolic post-modern statement. Yet it also stands as an extreme demonstration of the directorial dominance in German theatre – and indeed of its positive aspects. Whereas in other countries, in particular England, the playwright continues to dominate, in Germany the primary artist has become the director.

And it is perhaps not accidental that long before the Scandinavians, English plays formed the standard fare on German stages, even if these were historical texts. Thus already by 1766 over twenty plays by Shakespeare had been published in German translation, while Shakespeare’s complete works appeared by 1782, followed by no fewer than eight other translations – in particular by Schlegel and Tieck – between 1818 and 1839. This appropriation of Shakespeare deeply influenced not only Schiller, but also a number of the nineteenth-century German playwrights. Then, by the 1920s, contemporary English work followed: the most obvious being the plays of Bernard Shaw. Of course, even before this, the Austrian composer Oscar Straus transformed Shaw’s popular hit, Arm's and the Man (1894), into an even more popular – but from Shaw’s perspective, completely distorted and trivialized – operetta, The Chocolate Soldier (1908). While this might count as an early equivalent of the German director’s artistic liberty to transform any playwright’s script, in general Shaw’s plays were presented without artistic licence. Indeed almost every single one of his texts (at least up to the early 1930s) was translated by Siegfried Trebitsch, starting with Saint Joan. Produced by Max Reinhardt in 1924 – and with one of the more famous actresses of the era, Elisabeth Bergner, in the title role – this appeared in Berlin, opening just before the London production of the same year, and so marking the beginning of a trend that has become significantly more frequent in contemporary German theatre. Following that, it was not until the 1960s that drama in English made a significant mark on the German stage. This was the experimental and philosophical work of the Absurdists, which emerged from the small experimental studio stages or student productions, where they had first been performed in France and England, to the professional theatre through German productions, demonstrably influencing playwrights like Günther Grass or Tankred Dorst. Naturally, the most significant of these Absurdist transfers was Samuel Beckett – and it is again significant that in addition to simply staging his texts, Beckett himself