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Contemporary German Drama as Aesthetic Resistance against Right-wing Radicalism

Following the conservative turn in German politics after 1982, and the increase in right-wing violence after reunification in 1990, many playwrights expressed their concern through their writing. As a result, a wide range of plays addressed the problems of right-wing radicalism in various ways. Whilst the plays of the 1980s mainly focused on the memory of the Holocaust, presenting notorious Nazis and their victims on stage, the plays of the 1990s considered the rise of neo-Nazi crime in present-day Germany. Drawing on plays by George Tabori, Franz Xaver Kroetz, Rainald Goetz, Oliver Czeslik, Gundi Ellert, and John von Düffel, the essay discusses the ways in which the playwrights engage with the debate concerning the faces of fascism and xenophobia in Germany today.

Introduction

In the last two decades of the twentieth century, German dramatists approached right-wing radicalism and the rise of the Neo-Nazis in two different ways. In the 1980s, the flood of commemorations and anniversaries of the Holocaust and the Second World War prompted many playwrights to stage aspects of the Holocaust in order to remind the Germans of their fateful history. By contrast, the plays of the 1990s portrayed the shock of the escalation in violence on the streets following the right-wing riots in which several foreigners were brutally killed.

This essay will briefly consider the plays of the 1980s, focusing particularly on George Tabori’s *Jubiläum*, a play which presents us with the viewpoint of a Jewish writer. The second part will give an overview of the plays of the 1990s, showing the wide range of different responses to the attempted marginalisation of those who were considered to be foreign and different.

The 1980s: Between Anniversaries and a Hard Place

The early eighties saw many plays which responded directly to the Nazi genocide by focusing either on notorious individual Nazis or else on the man on the street. These efforts were fuelled by a landslide-victory of the Christian Democrats in the parliamentary elections of 1983, an event which marked a conservative turn in German politics. During a speech in Israel on 25 January 1984, Helmut Kohl employed the phrase the ‘Gnade der späten Geburt’, thereby absolving the younger generation from any responsibility for the Nazi past. In the *Express*, Alfred Dregger
Birgit Haas maintained that Germany should finally emerge from the shadow of Hitler and Auschwitz, and according to Franz Josef Strauß, the Germans should practise the ‘aufrechte Gang’. Conservative politicians such as Alfred Schikel generally aimed to decriminalise the German past:

Statt sich mit der Vergangenheit auseinanderzusetzen und die streckenweise kriminalisierte deutsche Geschichte unbefangen aufzuarbeiten, um das eigene geschichtliche Herkommen zu klären, demonstriert man für den Umweltschutz, besetzt Häuser oder protestiert in sogenannten Friedensmarschen gegen die Politik der Regierung. [...] Es wird daher mannigfaltiger Anstrengungen unserer Historiker, Pädagogen und Politiker bedürfen, um den Deutschen wieder einen natürlichen und unbefangenen Zugang zu Geschichte, Staat und Vaterland zu ermöglichen.

Since the 1980s, playwrights have not only produced collages of material dealing with German mass murder, they have also tackled this sensitive and traumatic period of recent German history in order to counteract the common tendency to gloss over the Nazi past. Intellectuals have taken a critical stance towards the popularity of right-wing radicalism and violence. Once again, their aim is to dismantle the myths of the neo-Nazis in order to show how their falsified historiography distorts history and offends its victims. In opposition to the revisionists, who try to belittle the Holocaust and even deny that it ever happened, thus indirectly justifying right-wing violence, playwrights such as Heinar Kipphardt, George Tabori, Thomas Strittmatter, and Volker Ludwig address the multi-faceted Nazi crimes from a variety of angles. Heinar Kipphardt’s play Bruder Eichmann (1982/83) focuses on the Eichmann trial in Israel in 1961, yet from a perspective which contrasts it with contemporary fascist tendencies. Tabori’s farce Mein Kampf (1987) presents us with a fictional encounter between the young Hitler and a Jew, Schlomo, in Vienna, during which the image of the politician Hitler is thoroughly deconstructed. Thomas Strittmatter’s Viehjud Levi (1982), written in the style of the new Volkstheater, tells the fate of a Jew in a small village after 1933. The director of the GRIPS-Theater, Volker Ludwig, produced a pedagogical play for the young, a musical production of Ab heute heißt du Sara (1989), which successfully adapted Inge Deutschkron’s novel Ich trug den gelben Stern.

George Tabori’s Jubiläum stands out, for it challenges the notions of good and evil. In 1983, while the official ceremonies, vigils, and inaugurations commemorating the 50th anniversary of Hitler’s coming to power continued, Tabori’s anti-jubilee focuses on the sad anniversaries of