Offending the Playwright: Directors’ Theatre and the ‘Werktreue’ Debate

This chapter investigates the relationship between text and performance through the lens of ‘Werktreue’, which broadly translates as ‘faithfulness to the play’. ‘Werktreue’ emerges as an intellectually contradictory term which has little basis in the practical business of theatrical production. Theresia Walser and Rolf Hochhuth are used as case studies to examine what offended playwrights might tell us about ‘Werktreue’ in the real world of the theatre before ethical and legal questions are addressed. The chapter concludes that there is no solution to the aporias at the centre of the realisation process and that playwrights may simply have to accept this condition.

‘Werktreue’ and the German Theatre System

Text crimes are not only perpetrated by authors. In the theatre, productions themselves, constructed by a collective of collaborators, often driven by a director, may similarly be read as texts, especially by playwrights, keen as they may be to compare their scripts with a finished production. The quality of the production may vary, yet, for the most part, playwrights tend to take such fluctuations in their stride. A problem arises, however, when the playwright perceives the difference between the play text and the performance text to be so great that similarities may only extend to the common employment of dialogue. That is, primarily, when the production includes a host of extra-textual devices which do not ostensibly appear in the play text itself. (A familiar example would be a modern-dress Shakespeare production.) In contemporary German-speaking theatre, directors have assumed a dominant role in the realisation process, and this has often brought them into conflict with playwrights, who have defended themselves by invoking a concept which has had something of a chequered history.

‘Werktreue’ is a curious term which is used routinely but perhaps rather uncritically in discourse surrounding the relationship between text and performance. The term is not easily translated into English; this ‘faithfulness to the play’ is something of an alien concept in English-speaking theatre because of the different dynamics of the two theatre systems, in particular the relative importance of the playwright and the
director. To generalise somewhat, English-language systems, in both the UK and the USA, tend to valorise the hallowed, almost untouchable words of the playwright. In the German-speaking countries, directors are central figures and their work has unleashed a debate on the problematic tenets of ‘Werktreue’ by adulterating the play text and viewing it as material to be (radically) reprocessed. In this chapter, I shall consider how ‘Werktreue’ has become such an issue in German theatre and examine its intellectual bases. I shall then use a series of case studies as a means of understanding the practical ramifications of the term before reaching conclusions concerning just how justified playwrights might be when taking offence in the face of the director’s work.

In order to understand this debate, one must first chart the rise of the director in the context of the German theatre system where, for over a century, directors have played a far more central role in the business of theatrical production than those in the English-speaking world. To an extent, this phenomenon is connected to the highly decentred nature of the system. Prior to unification in 1871, the rich patchwork of states, dukedoms and principalities meant that there were theatres all over the country, many with a central place in the cultural life of the particular province. Consequently, after that momentous date, major theatres existed all over Germany as opposed to being found exclusively in the capital city. One way of differentiating theatrical output within such a richness of provision was to emphasise the production itself over the play or the actors, but for this to happen the role of the director needed to develop. The director was no longer a realiser of a text and became an autonomous creative force. Georg II, Duke of Saxe-Meiningen, effectively initiated many of the approaches to directing still found in the theatre today, although at the time, in the second half of the nineteenth century, his drive to instil realism into stage production was considered ‘revolutionary’.2 Georg did not view the director’s task as realising what was in some way innate in the script but as imposing his aesthetic decisions on it and thereby transforming it. That said, his bid to heighten the realism of a play’s performance was perhaps surprisingly annexed to an idea of ‘Werktreue’. And herein lies one of the term’s contradictions: through an authentic use of costume and setting, and the belief that unstylised acting made the characters more ‘real’, he helped to establish processes which would reinforce the idea of ‘Werktreue’ as a set of conventions which were nonetheless based upon the active input of the director. However, the quest for authenticity betrays one of the ironies of an apparently ‘werkgetreue Inszenierung’: Meiningen actually visited