Summary

This study presents an overview and analysis of Georg Pondo’s *Weihnachtsspiel* enacted at the Brandenburg court in 1589, demonstrating the role of theatricals in court life and religious observance. The paper situates this play within Pondo’s oeuvre, contextualizes its performance in the dramatic history of the period, and discusses the noble child actors.

During the Christmas season of 1589 the princes and princesses at the court of the Brandenburg Elector Johann Georg presented a play in Berlin by Georg Pondo (also called “Pfund” and “Pfundt”) on the birth of Christ. The dating of the performance of the play is not as clear cut as may at first appear from later printings of the work. The motto from Galatians 4 which graces the title page bears the inscription “Anno. 1.5.89”, but it seems most unlikely this designation is meant to indicate the first of May 1589. A *Weihnachtsspiel* is entirely out of place in May, for it makes infinitely more sense to stage such a production at some point during the extended Christmas season. Wilhelm von Lewen, the child who recites the *Prologus*, begins the play by conveying New Years’ greetings to his noble audience:

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\begin{align*}
\text{Vill glug Euer Gnaden wiederfhar, } \\
\text{In anfang, zu dem Newen Jhar. } \\
\text{Gott las Euer Gnaden werden zu Theill, } \\
\text{Das New geborne Kindelein, } \\
\text{Dauon wir Jtz bringen herrein, } \\
\text{Ein Spill, kurz, schlecht, gering, vndt klein.}
\end{align*}
\]

In the *Epilogus*, the same presenter concludes the drama by again wishing its aristocratic audience a Happy New Year:

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Euer Gnadt Nehm mit uns so uorgutt,
Beuehln Euer Gnadt in Gottes Hudt
Wunschen ein Newes Jhar Jtzundt,
Euer Gnaden all aus Hertzen grundt.
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The more logical choice reads “1.5.89” not as day/month/year, but simply as a scribal modification of “1589”, situating the composition of the play in the Christmas season of that year, and its performance perhaps in the early days of January 1590 when felicitous wishes for the newly begun year would seem most appropriate.

Georg Pondo’s *Weihnachtsspiel* compels our attention for textual, contextual, and, most especially, for extratextual reasons—the play itself, its environment, and its performers convey valuable information on early festival culture at a remote North German court, about which Reformation literary scholarship knows all too little.

The *Niedersächsischer Gesamtkatalog* at the University Library in Göttingen, which correctly locates a nineteenth-century reprint of the play in Braunschweig, erroneously ascribes the work to the Saxon playwright Paul Rebhun, who is never known to have had any connection with the Berlin court nor to have ever visited the city. Rebhun, who died in Saxony in 1546, also never composed a *Weihnachtsspiel*, so its performance forty-three years later in Brandenburg would indeed constitute a remarkable occurrence.

In his 1839 edition of the *Weihnachtsspiel*, based on the original and hitherto unprinted manuscript, Gottlieb Friedlaender ultimately ascribes the work to Georg Pondo, but only after an extensive and misguided introduction to the historical development of the Berlin theater in the sixteenth century. As is the case with many of Georg Pondo’s other theatrical ventures, the play remained in manuscript form in the sixteenth century, a fact which explains why many of this author’s works were not preserved in collections and are now apparently lost. Of the fourteen plays that Pondo presumably wrote, any mention of an author. All citations are made from this edition and henceforth referred to as Friedlaender.

2 The manuscript in the Berlin Royal Library had the call number: Mscr. Boruss. Quart 71.