

**Marline Otte: Jewish Identities in German Popular Entertainment 1890-1933. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, New York 2006. 334 S., USD 85.**

While many studies – mostly in German, few in English – have been devoted to the role of Jews in German theatre, primarily from the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century up to 1933, little has been written on the contribution of Jews to German popular entertainment. Most studies concentrate on high culture, such as opera or theatre presenting ‘properly’ written dramatic works which constitute part of the legitimate cultural canon. Marline Otte, assistant professor of history at Tulane University, focuses her attention on the role played by Jews in German popular entertainment, arguing to the surprise of some readers that “the history of popular culture in Germany prior to 1933 cannot be separated from the history of Jewish entertainers” (5).

Otte’s study deals with three branches of popular entertainment: the circus, the so-called *Jargon* theatre, and the revue theatre. Remarkably, in the pre-war period Jewish families – Blumenfeld, Lorch, and Strassburger – dominated and shaped circus entertainment. Chronicling the story of the Blumenfelds, who as early as 1811 were the first Jewish family to establish an independent circus enterprise consisting of four horses, two bears, several dogs and apes as well as acrobats, Otte underlines their popularity among non-Jewish spectators as well as their continuous social advancement (not least due to their philanthropy!). Like their Jewish colleagues, the Blumenfelds were concerned with projecting an image of quality and middle-class respectability, which led, among others, to their resistance to so-called Americanization of circus entertainment, avoiding any form of sensationalism, and to new methods of self-promotion. The Blumenfelds managed to revive their circus business after the major crisis during the War, establishing their new headquarters in Magdeburg. In fact, with the establishment of a permanent arena in a German city they became pioneers among German-Jewish circus families. On the whole, however, by the 1920s their circuses became those of “the good old times”, losing touch with the new trends in mass entertainment. By 1928 the Circus Blumenfeld Jun. was bankrupt. The Holocaust saw the destruction of Jewish Circus families. About 150 members of the Blumenfeld family perished in the Shoah. Arthur Blumenfeld was the sole member of the dynasty who returned to circus entertainment after the war, but he had to sell his circus in 1949, only four years after the opening performance.

The second section of the study focuses on *Jargon* theatre, those stages which offered a hybrid form of entertainment, mixing Yiddish, Rotwelsch, French, German and local dialects, and seeking to satisfy the fascination of middle-class Berliners with folk culture while offering a good laugh. Acknowledging Peter Sprengel's work on *Jargon* theatre (*Populäres jüdisches Theater in Berlin von 1877 bis 1933*; Berlin 1997), Otte nevertheless challenges his underestimation of the theatre's impact on non-Jewish audiences, and his contention that this form of popular Jewish theatre was mainly a theatre "by Jews for Jews". Otte tells the story of the Gebrüder Herrnfeld's Theatre which was founded in Berlin in 1906, and of its rival, the Folies Caprice, in which the majority of actors were of Jewish descent, and argues convincingly that these theatres constituted a meeting ground for Gentiles and Jews, emerging as "part of a newly expanded public sphere that allowed Gentiles and Jews, women and men, to interact outside the constraints of the workplace and the limitations of domestic intimacy" (129). The *Jargon* theatres focused on family life, addressing quarrels between family members but also aspects of Jewish emancipation, such as mixed marriages or anti-Semitism, thus turning the private into a public affair. The early Weimar Republic saw the end of this genre, which in the words of Otte "reflected the confidence and optimism of the German-Jewish community earlier in the century" (197).

The final section of the book tells the story of the Metropol Theater, the birthplace of the revue, where Jewish jokes and references to Jewish stereotypes were no longer made by Jewish actors, but by Gentile comedians (such as Guido Thielscher, who presented the popular stage character Mr. Cohn). Catering to an affluent public, the Berlin elite as well as to the middle-class, the Metropol entertained Jews and Gentiles, and was "instrumental in the formation of a new public arena that allowed well-off Jews to gain admission to Wilhelmine society". (203) Run by a Gentile director, Richard Schultz, who founded the theatre in 1898, the Metropol engaged leading Jewish composers, such as Victor Hollaender and Rudolf Nelson, who wrote catchy songs, and the operetta diva, the Jewish Fritzy Massary, who – like her Jewish (notably assimilated) colleagues – rarely played Jewish roles. Like the other forms of popular entertainment, the Metropol suffered a decline in popularity after the War, and fared even worse under Jewish entrepreneurs Alfred and Fritz Rotter (originally A. and F. Schaie), owners of many Berlin theatres (Residenz, Lessing Theater, Theater des Westens, to mention only a few). Their purchase of the Metropol in 1927 gave rise to vicious polemics and anti-Semitic vituperations.

Otte's book is undoubtedly a major contribution to the study of Jews and the German stage in Imperial and Weimar Germany. Based on meticulous, comprehensive research work, including documents from ten archives, Otte sheds light on a branch of entertainment that has long been neglected, if not ignored. Offering interdisciplinary academic research of high quality, based in cultural studies and gender studies as well as performance and theatre studies, Otte's subtle analysis is enriched by lively storytelling.

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