

## Literatur, Musik und Kunst

**Peter W. Marx: Ein theatralisches Zeitalter. Bürgerliche Selbstinszenierungen um 1900. Tübingen/Basel: A. Francke Verlag 2008. 429 S., 29,90 €.**

Peter W. Marx and his oeuvre are well known to those interested in theatre studies and its connection to modern Jewish history. His post-doctoral dissertation (Habilitationsschrift, 2003) considered the theatre as a cultural space of memory, focusing on the work of George Tabori, Tadeusz Kantor und Rina Yerushalmi. His last book (2006) was devoted to the work of the Jewish director Max Reinhardt and the establishment of a „metropolitan culture“. In his current study, Marx, professor at the Institute for Theatre Studies at the University of Berne (Switzerland), offers a fascinating reading of theatrics and performance in their relation to society and social history. Concentrating primarily on the turn of the 20th century and the years following, Marx considers the theatre as „a central place and constitutive medium“ (p. 43) of a society characterized by dynamic change and the search for identity(ies).

The transformation of social and cultural notions is demonstrated in the opening chapter by the figure of the impostor, the *Hochstapler*, who both in reality and in his dramatic configuration represents the „traumatic mobility“ and precarious categories underlying the changing concepts of bourgeois society. The major part of the study is devoted to canonical stage figures such as Schiller's *Tell*, Lessing's *Nathan*, and Shakespeare's *Shylock*. Marx highlights

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Jewish director Leopold Jessner and his courageous attempt to break away with the traditional, often sentimentalized interpretation of Tell. On the dawn of the newly established Republic, in 1919, Jessner turned the stage of the *Staatstheater* into a place where the canonical text and the historical moment converged. Examining the changes in the portrayal of the best known stage Jews, *Nathan* and *Shylock*, Marx shows the shifts in their acceptance by, and integration into the bourgeois culture of the late 19th century. The price was high: it implied all too often „the disappearance of the Jewish identity of the figures who were understood merely as metaphor for a social or psychological situation” (p. 157).

The last part of the book calls attention to popular theatre forms– the so-called *Bauerntheater* – and their growing attractiveness in a changing modern culture. In his concluding chapter „Das Lachen von Parvenupolis”, Marx considers the *Lessing-Theater* as exemplary for the commercialization of theatre space, and parallel to this phenomenon the rise of the department-store as a new floor of theatricality and entertainment. Marx’s new book is a valuable contribution both to theatre studies and to cultural history.

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