

Richard D. Critchfield: From Shakespeare to Frisch. The Provocative Fritz Kortner. Synchron Verlag: Heidelberg: 2008. 223 S., 34,80 €.

Biographies and dissertations have been written in German about Fritz Kortner, one of the shooting stars of German theatre before the Holocaust, but little has been published about him in English. Richard Critchfield, professor emeritus at Texas A & M University, seeks to make amends. His biography of the great German-Jewish actor relies on Kortner's own account (mainly his autobiography *Aller Tage Abend*), on archival material (primarily the Kortner collection at the Archiv der Akademie der Künste in Berlin), on research work done by German colleagues (Klaus Völker, for one), as well as on conversations he was fortunate to conduct with Marianne Brün-Kortner, the daughter of the famous artist.

Kortner was not only *the* Shylock of the Weimar stage, he was for many *the* Jew. His early confrontation with the anti-Semitic world of his birth-town Vienna played a pivotal role in the narrative of his self-discovery – the discovery of himself as the Other, as the Jew, as the pariah. “I am convinced that this experience marked him more than did the Nazis,” his daughter told the American biographer. What he conceived as his ugliness, or his Jewish physiognomy, was his “trauma”, she maintains. Around the age of 15 Kortner decided to either avoid or conceal all external signs of being a Jew. He changed his name from Kohn to Kortner, took lessons with the famous Ferdinand Gregori, and made his first steps on the stage of the Nationaltheater in Mannheim. A brief engagement with Reinhardt in Berlin took him in 1911 to Warsaw and czarist Russia. In Kishiniew he was shown a wall where Jews had been shot. Indeed, the trip made him aware of his self-illusory attempt to flee Jewishness. It marked a turning point in his life. The year 1919 saw him as the young revolutionary Jew, Friedrich, in Ernst Toller’s expressionist play *Die Wandlung*. The same year brought about the accidental meeting at the railway station with the famous German-Jewish director and Intendant, Leopold Jessner. “Gott schauen Sie aus,” Jessner is said to have exclaimed. Kortner’s daughter adds that Jessner later termed the first impression her father made on him as “*ungestüm*”.

It was in Jessner’s Staatstheater in Berlin that Kortner came to fame. He was the vicious, expressively aggressive Gessler (not Gessner, as Critchfield writes) in Jessner’s revolutionary staging of Schiller’s *Tell* and the evil Richard in Shakespeare’s drama. At the age of 28 he was one of the leading stars in the glittering metropole. Critchfield argues that Kortner left Jessner because he had become convinced that Jessner’s expressionist style of staging was a hinderance to his further development (p. 37). This is only part of the story. There were all sorts of other misunderstandings as well, including payment. Kortner worked with Erich Engel and with Brecht and under Jürgen Fehling (1927) he played Shylock for the fourth time in his career. For Critchfield, Kortner’s portrayal of Shylock “was symptomatic of his sympathy not only with ‘maligned Jews’, but with the underdog per se” (p. 48).

Like other Jewish colleagues, Kortner was forced to leave Germany when the Nazis came to power, after suffering anti-Semitic slurs for years. Unlike many of his friends in exile, not least among them the great director Jessner, Kortner was relatively lucky, mainly due to his contacts with leading journalist and Roosevelt advisor Dorothy Thompson. Although he managed to get into the American film industry, he was one of the first exiled artists to return to post-war Germany, to the

dismay and accusations of many of his colleagues. His long forgotten film *Der Ruf* documents the ambivalent emotions that accompanied him on his way to and in Germany. Indeed, though indefatigably creative and active in West-Germany as director, actor and playwright, Kortner's last years were overshadowed by his anxieties and apprehensions of renewed anti-Semitism. Many rumours and scandals were associated with the hypersensitive, paranoid Kortner. One had to do with a controversial *Spiegel*-article in 1961 which "used and manipulated fact, rumor and innuendo in deconstructing Kortner" (p. 165). No wonder then that one of his memorable roles in post-war Germany was, once again, Shylock. Although encouraged by his wife, the actress Johanna Hofer, to play Nathan, Kortner rejected the idea. "Nathan was too unambiguous, too good, for my father's taste," recalls his daughter.

Let's hope that this English-written biography – published by a German press – will help acquaint the Anglo-Saxon world with this important and fascinating actor and director.

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