Performing for the Proletariat in Imperial Berlin: Actors and Spectators in the Early Years of the Freie Volksbühne (1890–1895)  
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Founded in Berlin right after the fall of Bismarck’s anti-socialist law in 1890 the Freie Volksbühne managed to stage its own theatre productions for about 90 years until in 1992 it finally resigned. This extraordinary long run of an independent theatrical association by no means could be expected, in particular at the beginning, when it was far from certain whether this in many regards risky experiment would be able to endure. As a consequence of its provocative proletarian origins in a pronounced imperial class society most studies of the early history of the Freie Volksbühne deal with politico-cultural and organizational aspects. As regards the aesthetic side, some studies investigate the plays which the Freie Volksbühne produced. The genuine theatrical aspect, however, which is to say the actual performances and their reception by the audience, is usually neglected.

The main reason for this deficit is that the available sources, mostly theater-reviews, are sparse and pay little attention to aesthetic concerns. By taking a new look at these sources, this essay will make an effort to investigate the relationship between the performances and their audiences. For it is precisely this relationship that differentiated the Freie Volksbühne performances from those of the contemporary bourgeois theatre and as a consequence was in large part responsible for the success of this historically significant artistic-political project.

Due to its newly gained status as capital of the Kaiserreich, Berlin’s population grew with breathtaking speed from about one million inhabitants in the late 1870s to about 1.6 million inhabitants in the early 1890s. About 500,000 of the population belonged to the working class and some 170,000 were industrial workers. The number of theater companies grew in analogy to the population. With the exception of subsidized court-theaters, like the Opera or the Königliche Schauspielhaus, most of these stages were primarily concerned with money-making rather than with artistic quality. At least eighteen permanent theaters adding up to a total capacity of approximately 18,000 seats were competing in the 1890s for paying visitors, not counting the around twelve music halls, vaudevilles, and summer theaters which offered another 12,000 seats. To this one may further add the brand-new genres of cabaret and so-called Tingle-Tangle stages for the entertainment of, in particular, the ‘demi-monde’.

Apart from searching for new theatrical attractions to fill the relatively large auditoriums (averaging 1,000 seats), the easiest way to maximize profits was to minimize the salaries of the actors. Berlin had an over-supply of actors, who were by no means organized or otherwise legally protected. With the exception of a few, wealthy stars (the so-called Virtuosen) these actors were severely underpaid and often lived even below the standards of the Lumpenproletariat. While workers averaged a daily salary between three to four Marks many actors earned less than one Mark per show. As the output of new productions was enormous, rehearsals had to be kept at a maximum of three to five meetings, which merely served technical matters like arranging the stage-settings and coordinating the moves and positions of the actors. Because of this lack of preparation the Virtuosen tended to
withhold their assistance, following the motto: “Those who have to practise have no talent.” The quality of performances, thus, steadily declined also because the average actor primarily sought to produce striking effects rather than to engage seriously with the complexities of the embodied character. 9 Besides the commercially corrupted taste of most producers and consumers, another main obstacle to artistic improvement were the severe restrictions by government censorship, which had severe effects on the autonomy of the working class.

In less than ten years Berlin had become the industrial centre of the Kaiserreich with a great concentration of all types of proletarians ranging from highly skilled, self-conscious craftsmen and well organized industrial workers to a ‘depraved rabble’ without any education and skills. Many workers and their families suffered from unbearable housing conditions, living in damp and dark one-bedroom dwellings without sanitary facilities. Compared to rural areas, however, workers in Berlin usually had better living conditions because of higher wages and shorter working hours (nine to ten hours as opposed to up to twelve hours). 10 Above all, urban proletarians found it easier to establish functioning communication networks, despite chancellor Bismarck’s infamous anti-socialists-law, which from 1878 to 1890 prohibited all socialist political and educational organizations. During this period socialist workers learned to camouflage by gathering in newly formed clubs and associations. While they masked these clubs as harmless entertainment circles devoted to singing, dancing, performing and reading, many members actually used them for secret party work and educational matters.

After the anti-socialist law was abolished in 1890 a strong desire for proletarian self-determination broke through and materialized in all kinds of politico-cultural activities. Thus, the idea for an independent people’s theatre emerged from Alte Tante (‘old aunt’), one of those proletarian social clubs. 11 Evidently, this idea and its realization was inspired by the Freie Bühne, which Otto Brahm had founded one year earlier (and which in turn had been influenced by André Antoine’s théâtre libre in Paris). Like the Freie Bühne, the Freie Volksbühne was organized as a licensed association with formally registered members. This ensured not only a guaranteed number of spectators so as to avoid as much as possible the risks of commercial theater, but, above all, because as an association it was not subject to severe political censorship. 12 At the same time, the Freie Volksbühne substantially differed from the Freie Bühne. Even at the very beginning when it was still run by a committee consisting of petit-bourgeois intellectuals the Freie Volksbühne had close links to the labor movement. It thus had other goals, other working conditions, a different audience, and a different public response to cope with than the sophisticated upper-middle-class oriented Freie Bühne.

Especially in the early years the Freie Volksbühne faced great artistic and organizational difficulties. The fear that other, more renowned theaters would not allow their actors to perform at the Freie Volksbühne proved unfounded. Yet the limited funds of the young association were barely sufficient to rent the decayed suburban Ostend-Theater for Sunday-matinees. But since the Ostend-Theater’s personnel were dramatically underpaid it was rather mediocre and the Freie Volksbühne had to hire in addition talented actors from other companies. As to be expected, the members of the Ostend-Theater demanded the same payment as the guests and they even managed to receive a bonus-fee for rehearsals, which at the time was exceptional and confirms the non-commercial intent of the Freie Volksbühne.

For the first two years the management chose the plays and also appointed the artistic director. The first in charge was Cord Hachmann, a thoughtful and solid practitio-
ner who had already successfully directed shows at Brahms’s Freie Bühne. Hachmann advocated the new naturalistic style of staging, which he had studied with Brahms. As a result of Hachmann’s still uncommon naturalistic approach the critics paid more attention to the staging than to the actors, who, being unfamiliar with this new kind of performing, generally had had to put up with negative reviews. Concerning the second Freie Volksbühne production, Gerhart Hauptmann’s Vor Sonnenaufgang (Before Dawn), the critic Heinrich Hart, an ardent partisan of naturalism, formulated this symptomatic impression: “The majority of the actors obviously did not move by their own laws and drives, but mechanically – exactly as Cord Hachmann, the director, had specified. In fact, he was the only one playing – the actors merely lent him their bodies.”13 Discussing the same production, the critic Otto Erich Hartleben, who like Hart was also a playwright, stated that on the contrary Hachmann’s efforts to establish naturalistic acting neither had an effect on the players nor on the audience. As most of the critics, Hartleben noticed a stylistic contradiction between the staging and the actors, who still displayed the inadequate declamatory pathos of the antiquated court-theatre and its illegitimate child, exaggerated melodrama. Dealing with the performance of a certain Mr. Hagemann who had to play the character of the socialist functionary Alfred Loth, Hartleben writes: “Mr. Hagemann is no realistic actor […] Mr. Hagemann understood how to step out of the confines of art as if he were an agitator at the rostrum addressing the crowd”.14 With a touch of bitter irony Hartleben noticed that this deliberate and gross striving to please the leftwing audience exactly attained its aim: “The public enthusiastically hailed that noble-toned Mr. Hagemann; this same man, who during rehearsals had driven the author, Gerhart Hauptmann, to despair, so that he kept away from the show”.15

As much as one can speak at all of a theatrical style in the first years of the Freie Volksbühne, it was characterized by a certain duality in which naturalistic elements stood next to melodramatic pathos. This unsound combination was the result of differing aesthetic positions in the fairly mixed ensemble. But also insufficient rehearsal work and casting were responsible for the coexistence of various styles. The audience, largely consisting of workers, however, was relatively indifferent to this stylistic mish-mash with which the critics were so concerned. For the workers content counted much more than form. For this reason it is short-sighted to explain the often intense reactions of the audience primarily with the occasionally overloaded, exaggerated acting. The audience responded most vehemently to class issues, which could be verbally stated or result from attitudes of the characters. For these spectators it was thus of subordinate importance how an actor portrayed a role if the role contained elements to which the viewer could relate his or her own proletarian existence.

A striking example of the audience’s decisive concern with class is reported by the critic Fritz Mauthner in his review of Ludwig Fulda’s rather tacky, class-appeasing Das verlorene Paradies (Lost Paradise). In a scene of little importance to the plot a worker on a picketing line refuses the money offered to him by a good-natured dandy. While the bourgeois public of the Deutsche Theater, in which the play previously had been staged, hardly took notice of this episode, it provoked angry reactions in the Freie Volksbühne. Yet when the worker replied to the dandy: ‘I am no beggar!’ Mauthner observed that “applause broke right into this open scene, the applause of relief, as if the playwright had retracted an insult”.16

The reservations of the Freie Volksbühne members against naturalism probably also relate to audience’s strong class-concerns. They neither result from the presumable lack
of experience with serious drama nor from the alleged taste for the crude entertainment of the music halls and vaudevilles. Unlike bourgeois audiences the workers accepted the unadorned representation of life as self-evident. Yet to see their misery all over again on stage did not appeal to them. Instead, they expected from the theatre suggestions how to master the difficulties of everyday life. So their lack of interest in naturalistic plays did not come so much from insensitivity to their problems. It was the plays’ missing outlook which left the workers fairly unengaged.\(^{17}\)

The actors often played without understanding the mental and intellectual differences between them and the workers. When their usually so emotional audience occasionally lost interest, some actors may have thought that the performance had not been sufficiently explicit and played it up more strongly, attributing the missing feedback to the workers’ lack of cultural refinement.\(^{18}\) A more formal reason for the indifference of the audience to naturalistic acting may stem from the simple fact, that even the most talented performers, such as Emmanuel Reicher, Else Lehmann, Rudolf Rittner or Oskar Sauer, who were confident of their effect on a bourgeois public, did not have the command of the proletarian idiom, neither verbally nor in body language, that the majority of the Freie Volksbühne audience was acquainted with.

Although many artists sided with the rising social democracy after the fall of the anti-socialist statutes, one can hardly ascertain an encouraging support of the Freie Volksbühne on the parts of the actors, despite their own distinct exploitation and suppression. A weakly developed class-consciousness, corresponding with the inability to organize on terms of collective bargaining can be seen as the main obstacle. Not until 1871 (that is, 25 years after the employers had formed their Deutsche Bühnenverein) the actors succeeded in establishing their own syndicate, the Genossenschaft Deutscher Bühnenangehöriger, which at first was involved less in labour conflicts than in matters of welfare (like old-age pensions).\(^{19}\)

Despite this general lack of solidarity, there were some prominent artists who offered the Freie Volksbühne their services free of charge. Oscar Blumenthal’s Lessing Theater, which was next to the Deutsches Theater the city’s most respected privately run stage, offered in the Freie Volksbühne’s first season a free performance of Hermann Sudermann’s rather melodramatic Die Ehre (Honour). Despite a high level of ensemble acting, which the Freie Volksbühne audience had not yet experienced, the spectators concentrated on the play’s social conflict between the depraved and corrupt tenants of a Lumpenproletarian back-premises and the self-righteous, no less degenerated inhabitants of the splendid front building.\(^{20}\)

The most distinguished actor who played for free at the Freie Volksbühne was Emmanuel Reicher, widely considered the “true master-actor of the naturalistic epoch.”\(^{21}\) One may guess that Reicher’s purpose was not merely benevolent. Considering his disposition to teach and experiment, it is more likely that he primarily wished to try out the effect of his acting style on this new and less experienced audience. Like Blumenthal Reicher offered a play of his own choosing: Friedrich Hebbel’s pessimistic and moralistic Maria Magdalena (Mary Magdalene). The majority of newspapers spoke of a superb production and Heinz Selo, the expert on the early Freie Volksbühne, even ranked it as the best in the theatre’s first five years. According to Selo, Reicher managed to “sweep his colleagues along”, so that he attained here “for the first time a truly superior group effort”.\(^{22}\) In his performance Reicher played the father Master Anton with great psychological realism and discarded much of the role’s inherent prudishness. But the audience nevertheless re-
mained reserved, probably because it could not go along with the self-destructive tendencies of the Master resulting from his narrow-minded petit-bourgeois morals. Instead, the workers were caught by the wicked town clerk and forcefully expressed their dislike.  

About two years after Mary Magdalene Reicher played the tragic painter Janikow in Hermann Sudermann’s Sodoms Ende (The End of Sodom) at the Freie Volksbühne, which also was not a success. This portrait of a genius artist, who became the victim of Berlin’s high society, was too strange for the proletarian audience. Reicher’s extremely realistic performance was so radical that parts of the audience was embarrassed and escaped into laughter.  

After only two years the Freie Volksbühne split up because of fundamental inner conflicts. The chairman Bruno Wille and with him other members of the executive board branched off to form the Neue Freie Volksbühne, which was dedicated ostentatiously to ‘pure art’ and left the rank and file without a say in organizational and artistic matters. The majority of workers decided against such a patronizing measure and remained at the Freie Volksbühne. Its new president, the Marxist historian and literary critic Franz Mehring, tried harder for a proletarian cultural politics than the old Freie Volksbühne management. But not only the Prussian government set him narrow limits. Mehring also suffered from a shortage of plays dealing with important social issues. Hauptmann’s Die Weber (The Weavers), however, constituted an exception and even though the Freie Volksbühne was always short of money, Mehring made every effort to put it properly on stage. Yet Hauptmann did not want the Freie Volksbühne to be the first and instead chose Otto Brahm’s Freie Bühne, where Cord Hachmann staged it in February 1893. Even though the production aimed at an academic upper-middle-class audience, Mehring praised it highly:

The performance left no doubts about the powerful revolutionary effect that the play would have on a receptive public with the capacity for enjoyment. […] The acting seemed to have been cast from one mould, and there was almost nothing wanting in any of the fifty speaking actors.  

The bourgeois critics were not quite as impressed as Mehring. Many were more pleased with the script than with the performance and rather narrow-mindedly complained about the actors’ difficulties with the Silesian dialect. While these shortcomings were in large part caused by the difficult rehearsals – rarely all fifty actors assembled together – the actors’ awkward reservation in the inflammatory scenes resulted from the difficult political circumstances. In order for his play to pass the political censors, Hauptmann agreed that the explosive scenes would be performed in a subdued manner.  

In October 1893 Emil Lessing directed another production of Die Weber with some of the same actors at the Neue Freie Volksbühne, before finally in December it was the turn of Mehring’s Freie Volksbühne. While two renowned naturalistic directors rehearsed the two preceding productions, the Freie Volksbühne gave the play to its house director, the experienced but rather unscrupulous Max Samst, who worked on everything that promised to entertain the audience. Samst recruited several actors from the previous productions and yet his version could not be considered naturalistic in the true sense of the word. This was in part due to the form of the text and to Samst who had hardly any connections with naturalism. Mostly, however, Samst’s more traditional production was a concession to the proletarian spectators who did not care about principles of style and instead focused on the message to react to it in a concerted fashion. The previous productions had also had an effect. But those who were directly concerned by the play saw it now for the first time, as it was not acceptable
for a class-conscious worker even to attend performances at the Neue Freie Volksbühne.

Those elements of the Die Weber which were new and pointed to the future were without a doubt the crowd scenes. In these, there is not only a multitude of people in motion; the movement itself reaches decisive meaning. Mehring wrote in an enthusiastic letter to Samst: “Our performance was not only better than the Neue Freie Volksbühne’s, but even better than the Freie Bühne’s, namely in the circumspect arrangement and powerful grouping of the crowd.”

The performances of the Die Weber marked the culmination of the early history of the Freie Volksbühne. They constituted the first indication that the proletarian-revolutionary theater that would be born some twenty-five years later was conceivable. It was not the “catch-phrases of social democrats,” as the Prussian police put it, that constituted the revolutionary potential of Die Weber. And although the weavers’ song has great explosive power, as already Mehring had pointed out, not even the dramatic configuration was responsible for Die Weber’s revolutionary effect. As has already been discussed, the acting also did not cause this dimension of the Freie Volksbühne’s production. After all, the traditional Samst was not concerned with stylistic questions. For him the naturalistic demand for fidelity was less important than aiming at dramatic effects. His Moritz Jäger (played by Gustav Kadelburg) delivered the weavers’ song with professional craftsmanship whereas Reicher and Rittner’s impersonation drove it home in the stumbling, difficult idiom of an uneducated worker – as specified by Hauptmann. The acting at the Freie Volksbühne was throughout declamatory, even by those guest-actors known for their naturalistic performances.

Not the play or the performance, then, constituted the true revolutionary potential of Die Weber but the audience. As a play about the masses it belonged to the masses, which alone could bring it to life. Maybe subconsciously this dynamic also surfaces in the reviews of the Freie Volksbühne’s production, which focused on the spectators’ responses. A critic wrote in the Kleines Journal:

Contemptuous laughter accompanied the naïve humiliation of the starved weavers. […] During the arrogant talk of the factory workers and policemen, the faces of the listeners were so tense that one expected rage to break out at any moment. From the more tender-hearted one heard compassionate sobbing throughout the sad events of the second act. However, when the delivery of the revolutionary weavers’ song brought the real dramatic movement, there was no holding them. The nervous shushing, which tried at the beginning to suppress any interrupting applause, in order that no word of the gospel assailing capitalism be lost, was soon drowned in the raging applause.

The Freisinnige Zeitung wrote on December 5, 1893: “When Luise challenged the men to rouse themselves at last to action, the play had to stop because of the storm of applause …”.

In the early years of the Freie Volksbühne, the main actors were undoubtedly the proletarian spectators, and not because the bourgeois journalists were as struck by them as if they were fabulous beings who had blundered into the theater. More important was the specific aesthetic function of the Freie Volksbühne audience, whose vivid reactions often generated the actual meaning of the performance. So the study of the early Freie Volksbühne’s productions is not valuable because of their notable aesthetic achievements, but because of just the opposite: despite the encouragement of the vitally interested audience, neither playwrights nor actors or directors were able to adequately respond to their spectators. The few artists who saw a new historical dimension in the Freie Volksbühne and wanted to help it along, like Reicher, more or
less withdrew, because they could not offer what was expected from them.

The early productions of the Freie Volksbühne demonstrate that theater was in no position to work actively towards a proletarian aesthetic movement. Not until the second historical period of socialist theater emerged after World War I, would the actors be “revolutionized.” The history of these playwrights, directors, actors, and scenery designers has already been extensively investigated. An exhaustive examination of the very first German attempt at a theater for the “emancipation of the masses” still has to be written.

Notes


2 During the Nazi regime the Freie Volksbühne was forced ‘into line’ before it was liquidated in 1939. After World War II it took two years to reestablish the association and to start its own theatre productions, when it was divided – due to the impending Cold War – into an Eastern and a Western organization. The end of the Freie Volksbühne as an independent producing unit is documented in: Hermann Treusch, Rüdiger Mangel (edd.), Spiel auf Zeit. Theater der Freien Volksbühne 1963–1992, Berlin 1992.


5 At best, Selo, Kunst, considers the actor-audience-relation as an important factor.


8 Cf. Selo, Kunst, p. 31.


10 Cf. Selo, Kunst, p. 32; Bonnell, People’s, p. 16.

11 Cf. Selo, Kunst, pp. 46–47; Bonnell, People’s, pp. 125–126.

12 For the problematic relationship of the Freie Volksbühne to Prussian censorship, see Selo, Kunst, pp. 83–98.

13 Tägliche Rundschau, No. 264 (November 11, 1890), quoted from Selo, Kunst, pp. 131–132. All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

14 Berliner Volksblatt (November 12, 1890), cited in Selo, Kunst, p. 139, footnote 37.


16 Magazin für Literatur, vol. LX, No. 16 (April 18, 1891), cited in Selo, Kunst, p. 175.


21 Martersteig, Theater, p. 755.

22 Selo, Kunst, p. 140.


27 Quoted from Siegfried Nestriepe, Geschichte der Volksbühne Berlin, Berlin 1930, p. 104.