

Perpetuation or Decline?
The German Theatre in Sibiu at the Turning Point 1918

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Abstract: The present paper focuses on the German theatre in Sibiu at the turning point of the year 1918. It first examines the context of the theatre within the Habsburg monarchy, its settings and the networking with other German-speaking theatres. Then it presents Leo Bauer as the long-standing director of the German theatre in Sibiu, switching to the overthrow of the theatre and its chances of survival within the new boundaries after the proclamation of the union of Transylvania with Romania.

Keywords: Transylvania, German theatre, 19th century, Leo Bauer, theatrical conventions, cultural transfer

The German Theatre in Sibiu: Historic Context and Practices

The "Radu Stanca" National Theatre in Sibiu, Romania (German: Hermannstadt, Hungarian: Nagyszeben), which has a Romanian and a German section, advertises since 2007 with the catchphrase „Founded in 1788“². Even if one does lack the knowledge of theatre history in Sibiu, some considerations should be made: Above all, from a theatre historical perspective, the idea of a continuum would be rather disputable. It would at the most point to an institutionalised theatre tradition of the city. One cannot speak about a Romanian national theatre in Transylvania before 1918, as this province was until the beginning of the 16th century under the Hungarian Crown and became then a semi-independent state under the suzerainty of

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² In original: „Fondat 1788“. See <http://www.tnrs.ro>. [accessed on 6.01.2018]

the Ottoman Empire. By the end of the 17th century, Transylvania became part of the Habsburg monarchy and as of 1867 – with the Austro-Hungarian Compromise (*Ausgleich*), the emergence of the dual monarchy – it stood again under the Hungarian Crown (Transleithania). Only after the First World War, in 1918, Transylvania proclaimed the union with Romania. Sibiu was until 1790 the capital of the Grand Duchy of Transylvania and it remained the cultural centre of the Transylvanian Saxons up to 1918, as it was predominantly influenced by German culture.

Therefore, it is not possible to comprise the history of the theatre in Sibiu into one of a national theatre, due to the shifting of boundaries and the historically determined prerequisites. Although, the town could look back on a rather long tradition of German theatre, which went back to the 16th century, to the time of the Protestant school drama, but it would not come to the founding of a *national stage* for the Transylvanian Saxons. The city had a theatre, which was founded in 1788 and owned by the book printer and editor Martin von Hochmeister the Elder (1740-1789). It was built in one of the former fortification towers of the town wall and leased out to different German-speaking touring companies. The theatre went through various status changes since the middle of the 19th century: it was first a private institution, then the town theatre, until it became a theatre for the German minority.

The German theatre in Sibiu was part of a dynamic network of German-speaking theatres in the Habsburg monarchy, within which theatrical practices were exchanged, beyond the common perception of a cultural correlation between centre and periphery, in which Vienna played the role of the theatre metropolis. As Helga Mitterbauer puts it, the dynamic network considers also bypasses and interstations through which cultural elements are often transferred³. With regard to theatre, this network was not mainly powered by the fact that theatre productions circulated throughout Central Europe, but by the transfer of theatre practices like staging and acting.

³ See Helga Mitterbauer, "Dynamik-Netzwerk-Macht. Kulturelle Transfers „am besonderen Beispiel“ der Wiener Moderne" ["Dynamics-Network-Power. Cultural Transfers Illustrated by the Viennese Modern Age"] in *Ent-grenzte Räume. Kulturelle Transfers um 1900 und in der Gegenwart* [Expanded Spaces. Cultural Transfers around 1900 and Nowadays], edited by Helga Mitterbauer and Katharina Scherke (Wien: Passagen Verlag, 2005), 113.



Fig. 1: Theatre in Sibiu (Hermannstadt)

The theatre of the 19th century was based on certain conventions of performance, which Marion Linhardt describes using the term "performative Stereotypen"⁴ [performative stereotypes] and doing so she is referring not only to the stage space or the design, but to the actor himself. One of the most important stereotype was the system of dramatic roles, which strongly regulated the cast and led to a surge of new theatre plays. With the beginning of the 19th century, German theaters introduced the French model of organizing the company, in which each actor was casted according to his acting skills.⁵ Thus, roles were not individually but standardised. This will later come to a change through naturalism and the emerge of *Regietheater* (the director's theatre). Roles like chevalier, intrigueur, burlesque were complemented by new ones, as the French comedy of manners and its

⁴ Marion Linhardt, "Kunstwissenschaft vs. performative Stereotypen?" ["Aesthetics versus Performative Stereotypes?"] in *Zeit/Sprünge zu Aspekte des Performativen, Theatralen, Pädagogischen, Medialen und Rhetorischen im 19. Jahrhundert* [Time/Lapses on Aspects of Performativity, Theatre, Pedagogy and Rhetoric in the 19th Century] edited by Nicole Haitzinger and Claudia Jeschke (München: Epodium, 2007), 115.

⁵ See Hans Doerrey, *Das Rollenfach im deutschen Theaterbetrieb des 19. Jahrhunderts* [The Role System in German Theatre in the 19th Century] (Berlin: Gesellschaft für Theatergeschichte, 1926), 12-13.

German imitations were included in the repertoire: *bon viveur*, *salonnière*. These typecasts led to the expansion of personnel: from 17-20 actors in the 18th century to 25-30 actors in the 19th century.⁶ While bigger theatres disestablished the system of dramatic roles, smaller ones in the provinces would keep it out of economical reasons, as it facilitated the engagement of actors.⁷

The theatre routine of the 19th century displayed the symptom of mobility, which was in contrast to the coexistent sedentism of troupes. Anja Hentschel suggests that the reestablishment of theatres induced an increased mobility of individual actors and no longer of touring companies, as it happened since the 18th century.⁸ A quick look into the *Neuer Theater-Almanach*⁹ would confirm the temporary structure of stage ensembles of many German-speaking theatres.

For the German theatre in Sibiu, Leo Bauer (1848-1939) is an example of such a mobility. He was born in Vienna and was at first a background actor at the "Burgtheater", while attending the drama school of Valentin Niklas¹⁰ (1806-1883). His school was rather a training stage, where Heinrich Laube¹¹ (1806-1884) discovered Leo Bauer and brought him to the "Wiener Stadttheater" in 1874. Ineluctable, Bauer followed several engagements at theatres across the monarchy as a character actor and director. In 1883 he was at the "Theater in der Josefstadt" and one year later at the "Theater an der Wien". He went then to Teschen (Cieszyn/Silesia), Sarajevo (Bosnia), Pola (Croatia), Bielitz (Bielsko/Silesia), Sibiu and Brasov (Transylvania), before settling at Sibiu in 1893 and taking over the theatre for the next 27 years. He made here his stage debut on the 7th of October 1890 as King

⁶ Doerrey, *Das Rollenfach*, 30-31.

⁷ See Judith Eisermann, *Josef Kainz – Zwischen Tradition und Moderne. [Josef Kainz - Between Tradition and Modernity]* (München: Utz Verlag, 2010), 25-26.

⁸ See Anja Hentschel, *Mobilitätsforschung und Theatergeschichte: Zur Mobilität von Schauspielern im 19. Jahrhundert. [Mobility Research and Theatre History: The Mobility of Actors in the 19th Century]* in *Aktuelle Tendenzen der Theatergeschichtsforschung. [Recent Trends in Theatre History]* (Berlin: Gesellschaft für Theatergeschichte, 1996), 55.

⁹ *Neuer Theater-Almanach* was a theatre yearbook published in Berlin, which listed all German theaters in Europe with their artistic and administrative staff, starting with 1880 until 1914.

¹⁰ Valentin Niklas was an actor and director at theatres in Vienna and the province until 1859, when he became stage manager and director of supernumeraries at the Burgtheater in Vienna.

¹¹ Heinrich Laube was a German dramatist and theatre director, first at the Burgtheater and then at the Stadttheater in Vienna.

Louis XI. in the one-act play *Gringoire* by Théodore de Banville (1823-1891), a repertory piece from the "Burgtheater" in Vienna. The local press complimented him as being a sensible and purposeful actor with a sonorous voice and great skills, concluding that he is an excellent acquisition.¹²

Leo Bauer's career until his long-term engagement in Transylvania is regarded as exemplary for a mobility that differs from the specific, convergent metropolis-province model. Despite the decisive role of Vienna, it points out to a brisk activity at the peripheries, at those locations, which were interconnected. As Philipp Ther has noticed it for the musical theatres in Central Europe, these contacts strengthen and get permanent. They formed multilateral networks amidst intensive cultural transfer processes.¹³ To understand these dynamics one has to look at the requirements of stage engagements and the arrangement of the repertoire. A director would compile his ensemble before the season started with the help of theatre agencies to begin rehearsals on time. The above mentioned role system would play a significant part in this undertaking. The repertoire consisted of plays en vogue, then classical plays, which formed the base stock. We can therefore conclude, that the repertoire of German theatres in the Habsburg monarchy coincided, and, as the chronicler summed it up, these theatres were both in the concentric perimeter of Vienna as a theatrical metropolis, as well as part of a network of many further locations:

Für unsere Bühne ist ebenso wie für alle deutschen Provinztheater unserer Monarchie der Wiener Theatermarkt maßgebend: wir müssen von dort unsere Darsteller beziehen, nicht nur weil Berlin zu weit ist, sondern auch, weil der reichsdeutsche Schauspieler zumeist unserem Geschmack weit weniger entspricht, als der österreichische. Somit ist ein gewisser Kreislauf von selbst gegeben, der unsere Stadt mit Orten wie Laibach, Klagenfurt, Olmütz, Troppau, Czernowitz uff. verbindet.¹⁴

¹² *Siebenbürgisch-Deutsches Tageblatt*, XVII, 22.10.1890.

¹³ See Philipp Ther, *In der Mitte der Gesellschaft. Operntheater in Zentraleuropa 1815-1914*. [In the Middle of Society. Musical Theatres in Central Europe 1815-1914] (Vienna: Oldenburg, 2006), 414.

¹⁴ *Siebenbürgisch-Deutsches Tageblatt*, XL, 21.10.1913. "The theatre market in Vienna is decisive for us, as well for all German province theatres of our monarchy: we have to get our actors from there, not only because Berlin is too far away, but also because the German actor suits us less than the Austrian actor. It's a natural circuit, which ties our town to places like Ljubljana, Klagenfurt, Olomuc, Opava, Chernivtsi."

Redaktion des Siebenbürgisch-Deutschen Tageblatts...

Siebenbürgisch-Deutsches

Tageblatt.

Verantwortlicher Redakteur...

Nr. 1. Hermannstadt, Donnerstag 1. Januar. 1874.

In unserm Leben!

Das Siebenbürgisch-Deutsche Tageblatt... In unserm Leben! Das Siebenbürgisch-Deutsche Tageblatt...

...und die Landeskinder... In unserm Leben! ...und die Landeskinder...

...und die Landeskinder... In unserm Leben! ...und die Landeskinder...

Semifleton.

Reinhold. I. Januar 1874.

Im Semifleton... Reinhold. I. Januar 1874. Im Semifleton...

...und die Landeskinder... Im Semifleton... und die Landeskinder...

...und die Landeskinder... Im Semifleton... und die Landeskinder...

Fig. 2: Siebenbürgisch-Deutsches Tageblatt, no 1.1874.

The circulation of actors predestined the above mentioned analogy of the repertoires and, if some differences could be noticed, their outcome in a comparative analysis would rather be of humble importance. Required local features or selfconception would eventually shatter due to this correlations between repertoire and theatre business. The actors would produce their role range to theatre agencies and thus get their engagement. The autonomous study of a role with less diffusiveness would not have brought the desired engagement or assumed reputation.

The Repertoire

Constantly published theatre reviews as well as the retrospect of theatre seasons and contributions to events on the stage in Sibiu and on other stages were purveyed by Ernst Jekelius the Elder (1862-1937), attorney, senator and deputy mayor of Sibiu, who monitored the theatre activity of his home town as a second profession since 1887. His reviews were one of the most widely read sections of the daily paper "Siebenbürgisch-Deutsches Tageblatt". Jekelius intended to write a theatre history based on his notes, all he left is a sketch of an overview, which listed first the "noble inventory" of the German theatre in Sibiu within a time span of 50 years (from 25th of March 1874 to 16th of November 1923)¹⁵: Johann Wolfgang Goethe (*Götz von Berlichingen, Clavigo, Egmont, Faust, Iphigenie*), Friedrich Schiller (*The Bride of Messina, Don Carlos, Demetrius, The Maid of Orleans, Intrigue and Love, Maria Stuart, The Robbers, Turandot, Wallenstein, Wilhelm Tell*), Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (*Emilia Galotti, Minna von Barnhelm, Nathan the Wise*), William Shakespeare (*Taming of a Shrew, Henric IV, Hamlet, Julius Caesar, The Merchant of Venice, King Lear, Macbeth, Othello, Romeo and Julia, Richard III, A Midsommer Night's Dream, Much Ado About Nothing, Twelfth Night, A Winters Tale*), Franz Grillparzer (*Die Ahnfrau [The Ancestress], The Jewess of Toledo, The Fortune and Fall of King Ottokar, Des Meeres und der Liebe Wellen [Waves of Sea and Love], Medea, Sappho*), Christian Friedrich Hebbel (*Gyges and his Ring, Judith and Holofernes, Maria Magdalena*), Heinrich von Kleist (*Katie of Heilbronn, The Prince of Homburg, The Broken Jug*).

¹⁵ Ernst Jekelius, "Das deutsche Theater in Hermannstadt 1874-1924" ["The German Theatre in Sibiu 1874-1924"] in *Siebenbürgisch-Deutsches Tageblatt*. LI, 1.01.1924.

This list might seem misleading as it highlights a literary canon of classics. As we know now, theatre underwent a commercializing starting with the second half of the 19th century, which involved the extension of the light stage literature, automatically referred to as low-grade stage productions by the historiography. Recently, theatrical research is pleading for an enlarged perspective upon theatre, in the sense of its commercializing, beside its aesthetic factor.

Theatrical firms' fiscal practices derive not only from an aesthetic outlook but also from the interactions of consumers, producers, capital, and what was called in the nineteenth century political economy.¹⁶

Peter W. Marx describes this as a contract between the theatre and its public, not only as participants in a cultural event, but as economical partners, which are subjects to the law of demand and supply and to which the dichotomy of high and low literature is inherent:¹⁷

Though many attempts have been undertaken to overcome the simplistic dichotomy of 'high' versus 'low' culture, the implicit binary of this opposition remains present and influences the concept of modern theatre.¹⁸

Altogether, the theatre had in the above mentioned period 6792 stagings, out of which 2298 were operettas, while the rest was in large part dedicated to comedy (burlesque, farce, folk play). Jekelius' notes reveal that the stage in Sibiu was also shared by Transylvanian Saxon associations and by Romanian and Hungarian theatre companies, both professionals and dilettantes.

The Turning Point 1918

Apart from those impacts and upheavals, for which certain persons take the responsibility, for instance a new theatre manager, or, apart from cultural milestones as the turn of the century at 1900, a continuum may be

¹⁶ Tracy C. Davis, *The Economics of the British Stage, 1800-1914*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), cited in Peter W. Marx, "Consuming the Canon: Theatre, Commodification, and Social Mobility in Late Nineteenth-Century German Theatre", *Theatre Research International* 31, no2 (2006): 129.

¹⁷ Peter W. Marx, *Consuming the Canon*, 130.

¹⁸ Peter W. Marx, *Consuming the Canon*, 130.

affected by events rooted in current political affairs, as the outbreak of the First World War or the rearrangement of states after 1918. These turning points put the theatre into new order patterns, where adaptation is called for.

The activity of the theater in Sibiu was affected by the war since its outbreak, even though the town became part of the theatre of war only in 1916, with the offensive of the Romanian army in August 1916. The theatre didn't close down, as it became a matter of distraction for the remaining population, by staging mostly comedy and operetta. War affected the repertoire also in political terms, as some authors couldn't be staged in the Austrian-Hungarian monarchy. French and English authors were now on the enemy side, except Shakespeare, which was still scheduled in the repertoire. While theatres in Germany reverted to national-patriotic plays, the theatre in Sibiu didn't become the stage for a nationalistic spirit. The audiences great appetite for the musical genre is reflected in the statistics of Leo Bauer's mandate.

War and political reorder after the proclamation of the Union of Transylvania with Romania in 1918 had an adverse effect on the German theatre in Sibiu. With the downfall of the Austrian-Hungarian Monarchy came now a series of attempts to curtail or even dissolve institutions of minority, in this case of the German minority. New legislative decrees impeded the theatre management to pick up its tradition, e.g. frontier closure, refused admission for German and Austrian artists. These led to a temporary closing of the theatre.

Starting with 1918, the German population in Transylvania came to regard its almost lost theatre as a valuable means in the preservation of their identity. The theatre reacted to it by trying to find new forms of survival. Due to the precarious financial situation, some of the actors left Bauer's ensemble. At the same time the ensemble split into smaller touring companies, which played in various Transylvanian towns, hoping for vital earnings. Simultaneously, a German theatre association was founded in Sibiu on the 23rd of April 1919 as a reaction to the predicaments caused by the war and the new state structure. The German cultural journal wrote: „Wir leben abgeschlossen von der großen Welt, ohne genügende Verbindung mit dem befruchtenden Ausland. Kein Wunder, wenn das Theater den modernen Ansprüchen nicht mehr genügen kann.“¹⁹ [„We live isolated from the big world, without enough connection to the fertilising abroad. No wonder that the theatre cannot meet the high demands of modern culture.“]

¹⁹ [H.T.S.], "Theater und Theaterverein in Hermannstadt" *Ostland. Monatsschrift für die Kultur der Ostdeutschen*. I, 3rd issue, (August 1919): 160.

The association aimed to find new actors, literally out of their own ranks. Thus, they organized regular rehearsal evenings. They trusted Leo Bauer's long term experience to provide young talents. But their primary objective was the valorisation of German literature, particularly the literature of the Transylvanian Saxons. The focus on local cultural assets led to the fact, that the first play staged by the association was the historical Drama *Die Flandrer am Alt* [*The Flemish at the Olt*] by Michael Albert (1836-1893). The play portrayed the settlement of the Saxons²⁰ on the river Olt in Transylvania in the year 1150. They had been invited by the Hungarian king to protect the area from the invading Cumans and established here their homeland.

Although they played it six times to a full house, the critics rejected the choice, arguing that the play was an example for immature indigenous stage literature.²¹ These reaction states an orientation towards up-to-date theatre practice and less a withdrawal into provincialism.

In the spring of 1921, representatives of the German theatre association in Sibiu called on Dr. Emil Isac (1886-1954), inspector general of the theatres in Transylvania and Banat to present the plans of an arrangement of the German theatre. They met the approval of Isac, the general public was then informed that all aspirations will be brought together into a memorandum. It should then be presented on the 27th and 28th of April 1921 in Bucharest at the congress regarding the regulation of theatres in Romania. Head of the congress was the minister of culture, Octavian Goga (1881-1938). These efforts combined with the responsiveness of the Romanian part brought the hope, that the German theatre will have a future. Even if the theatre lost its license in 1922, it will have been reestablished in the 1930s and then definitive after the war in 1956.

As for Leo Bauer, he couldn't cope with the new situation, in spite of or perhaps because of his long term experience in a lost theatre business, also refusing any support from the new structures. He represents the end of an era of theatre history, which couldn't be resurrected.

²⁰ The term „Saxon“ is a historical misinterpretation; it applies to German-speaking population that came from the area of what today is Flandres, Wallonia, Luxemburg.

²¹ Ibid., 161.

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