

Bryn Mawr College
Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr
College

Growth and Structure of Cities Faculty Research
and Scholarship

Growth and Structure of Cities

1996

Review of *Berlin Cabaret*, by Peter Jelavich

Barbara Miller Lane

Bryn Mawr College, blane@brynmawr.edu

[Let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

Follow this and additional works at: http://repository.brynmawr.edu/cities_pubs

 Part of the [Architecture Commons](#), [History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology Commons](#),
and the [Urban Studies and Planning Commons](#)

Custom Citation

Lane, Barbara M. Review of *Berlin Cabaret*, by Peter Jelavich. *Central European History* 29 (1996): 138-140.

This paper is posted at Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College. http://repository.brynmawr.edu/cities_pubs/15

For more information, please contact repository@brynmawr.edu.

Berlin Cabaret. By Peter Jelavich. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 1993. Pp. xii + 322 (40 illustrations). \$39.95. ISBN 0-674-06761-4.

As depicted in Franz Schulze's recent biography, Philip Johnson returned to Berlin again and again in the early 1930s. He came not only to reaffirm his admiration for Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and the Bauhaus in preparation for the famous Museum of Art exhibition on "The International Style," but also to sample the deviant excitements of Berlin's night life, or its "cabarets." Johnson, who admired Hitler and Roehm too, eventually learned to his disappointment that Nazism was unfriendly to homosexuality. But before that, he went to Berlin in search of sin.

Johnson's view of Berlin, and that of most Americans, was shaped by Brecht and Weill's *Mack the Knife*, by Marlene Dietrich's Lola Lola in *The Blue Angel*, and by Christopher Isherwood's stripper Sally Bowles. Visitors attracted by these images did not expect to enjoy the beauties of splendid, sunlit streetscapes in what Karl Scheffler called "the capital of all modern ugliness" (*Berlin: Ein Stadtschicksal*). Instead, they looked for forbidden excitements in the sleazy places of the city of the night.

This group of common impressions of Berlin and its nightlife is the starting point of Peter Jelavich's wonderful book on the Berlin cabaret. While the author does indeed see the cabaret as a specifically Berlin institution, he begins by demolishing most of the usual stereotypes. "Lola Lola, Sally Bowles, and Brecht and Weill were . . . on the boundaries of cabaret. And those boundaries were very fluid." The "real" Berlin cabaret was not strip shows, not vaudeville, not theater—rather it was a unique form of entertainment. It was defined by the intimacy of the small nightclub or theater setting; it included music and dancing and satirical lyrics—sometimes broadly political and sometimes not. (Jelavich sees no single political position as characteristic of the cabaret.) The satire was informed by "*Berliner Witz*," that rapid-fire kind of humor, laced with cynicism and complaint, that Berliners had been famous for since the early nineteenth century. (*Berliner Witz*, suggests Jelavich, was particularly suited to the kind of syncopated music developed in the revues of the Weimar period.) Berlin cabarets were not the product of the 1930s; rather they began around 1900 and were founded by intellectuals—Ernst von Wolzogen, Max Reinhardt, Rudolf Nelson.

These cabaret founders were close to avant-garde artists and writers both before and after the First World War: August Endell designed the Motley Theater for Wolzogen in 1901 and Peter Behrens designed a setting for Max Reinhardt's *Sound and Smoke*; after the war Hans Poelzig made room for *Sound and Smoke* in the basement of his Grosses Schauspielhaus (which itself housed the larger Reinhardt productions). In 1928, Erich Mendelsohn designed a new theater for Kurt Robitschek and Paul Morgan's *Kabarett der Komiker*. Kurt Tucholsky, the leading political satirist of Weimar Germany's early years, wrote lyrics for *Sound and Smoke*. (He was rather

quickly forced by audience reaction to moderate their bite.) And, for a short time at least, Berlin Dadaists drew close to the cabaret: Georg Grosz and John Heartfield created the puppet-players for Walter Mehring's mordant *Simply Classical*, performed in *Sound and Smoke* in 1919, which "reduced to a common level of ludicrousness" all "the major actors in postwar Germany."

The Berlin cabaret was also distinguished by great performers: Claire Waldorf, Paul Graetz, Rosa Valetti, Margo Lion and Marlene Dietrich, Willy Praeger and, of course, the "Tiller Girls," that amazingly coordinated, almost machine-like kickline of identical-looking "girls," dressed on the "flapper" model and thoroughly asexual. Through a combination of biography and vignettes from the shows, Jelavich brings their work alive.

Berlin cabaret, then, was imbedded in Berlin intellectual life. Jelavich's documentation of these relationships offers a great gift to historians of German culture—indeed to all historians of modern Germany. Of course cabaret performances that included music, lyrics, and a sequence of acts, because of their ephemeral nature, are particularly hard to recapture. To render the lyrics for an English-speaking audience would seem to be an impossible task. But Jelavich almost always succeeds, combining literal meaning with rhyming doggerel. A brief example from *Simply Classical*: "The whole thing's lost every trace of romance,/ The hero's pose, the stately stance./ There's no more crown and no more throne,/ In short, it's just not worth a bone" translates the following lines: Und dabei fehlt der Sache jede Romantik,/ Die Heldenpose, die Iambengigantik./ Man krönt nicht mehr und man thront nicht mehr./ Mit einem Worte: es lohnt nicht mehr."

If the lyrics are hilariously present in Jelavich's book, the music is largely absent. The author is too often reduced to describing a particular song as "peppy." Maybe the scores are no longer extant, but if they are, it would have been useful to reproduce a few. One would also be grateful to know more about the costumes and settings. The pictures of architect-designed theaters are useful indeed, as are the pictures of some performances. But the illustrations are not always of the best quality, and many more would have been welcome. Perhaps the press was not willing to publish more.

My main criticism of this splendid book has to do with its explanatory framework, not with its content. In trying to make the argument that Berlin cabaret was specific to Berlin, Jelavich claims that cabaret was essentially "metropolitan," because it employed fragmentary and serial images, a machine aesthetic, and a kind of collage. In this, it was closely related, as the author rightly says, to Dada and to the collage work of the later twenties (such as that of Schwitters and Höch). Jelavich employs the well-known reasoning of Georg Simmel (in "The Metropolis and Mental Life" of 1903) as an explanation. Simmel had stressed that the metropolis brings about "the intensification of nervous life" and a staccato series of

impressions; Jelavich sees these experiences as especially prevalent in Berlin art, theater, and cabaret because the city had grown so fast, so large, so late. But if rapid growth can produce cabaret, why not a Manchester cabaret, a Chicago cabaret, or even—a Tokyo cabaret? Or if size alone is a factor, why not London or New York?

Jelavich has fallen prey to a circular argument. Simmel's view of the central role of the ephemeral and the disjunctive within modern urban life was a part of a broader mistrust and ambivalence toward the city and toward modernity itself. The same mistrust and ambivalence was felt by the great majority of German intellectuals in the early twentieth century. These and similar ideas reappeared in the preoccupation with ambiguity and with the fragment that characterized the arts in Germany after the war. Simmel, in other words, may have helped to inspire Berlin cabaret, but he does not explain it. Nor were an emphasis on the fragment and on multiple sequences of images restricted to the art of Berlin in the Weimar period: they may be found in Munich, Dessau, Hamburg, and Cologne, in Paris and Moscow, before and after the First World War. (And of course both Paris and Munich had a flourishing tradition of cabaret, as well.) Thus, the question remains, why Berlin, and why cabaret? The answer must lie in the realm of patronage, and in the location of audience, rather than in any "metropolitan" qualities specific to Berlin. Berlin, shortly before and then increasingly after the war, became a new kind of center for artistic and intellectual experimentation, drawing artists, literary figures, and dramatists from all over the world. Here more than elsewhere, the profundities and inherent contradictions within German thought gave rise to innovation in a context of rapid social and political change. This atmosphere nurtured the cabaret; perhaps *Berliner Witz* did the rest.

In the introduction, Jelavich remarks that cabaret "represented freedom and creativity and play," values that, he says, producers and performers derived from Nietzsche's thought, but that then appeared to be reaffirmed by a new politics and a new society in the early years of the Weimar Republic. Jelavich's last chapters deal with cabaret under National Socialism and cabaret in the concentration camps. Here the author shows the entertainment medium robbed of freedom, creativity and play, robbed of political satire, robbed too of any reference to a metropolis despised by Goebbels; reduced to empty complicity. Most of the performers and producers of cabaret died in the camps. The kicklines continued for a while, though: Hitler liked the machine-like behavior and the militaristic look of the Tiller Girls.

These are wrenching and memorable conclusions, of great significance for our view of modern German history.

BARBARA MILLER LANE
BRYN MAWR COLLEGE