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## "Ersatz Comedy in the Third Reich"

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# **Ersatz Comedy in the Third Reich**

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The idea performing comedy, and performing a lot of comedy, during one the most systematic reigns of terror the world has ever known may at first blush seem somewhat degraded; researching comedy during the Third Reich may appear downright perverse, but my research to date informs me that even Nazis were capable of innocent laughter. The perception of most people, especially in the English-speaking world, is that “German comedy” in the first place is an oxymoron. The fact is, however, that 42,000 productions were staged between 1933 and 1944 in the Third Reich, and the majority of them were comedies. The most frequently performed were plays by the now forgotten likes of August Hinrichs, Maximilian Böttcher, and Fritz Peter Buch, Jochen Huth, and Charlotte Rissmann. Who were these playwrights? Why were their plays so popular? What kind of experience did they offer to audiences under a regime like Hitler’s?

The most popular comedy in the Third Reich by a contemporary playwright<sup>1</sup> was August Hinrichs’ *Wenn der Hahn kräht* (When the Rooster Crows), the kind of comedy that accorded with Nazi taste. It is a “rustic comedy” in a bucolic setting, imitating Carl Zuckmayer’s *Der fröhliche Weinberg* (The Merry Vineyard), one of the most popular and frequently performed plays during the Weimar Republic.<sup>2</sup> After seeing Zuckmayer’s enormously popular comedy in

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<sup>1</sup>The most frequently produced comedy of all was Lessing’s *Minna von Barnhelm*, with 203 productions. Hinrichs can claim to be the most frequently produced comic playwright, however; *When the Rooster Crows* was produced 182 times, and his *Krach um Iolanthe* (Row Over Iolanthe) was close behind, with 157 productions. Together, those comedies were performed nearly 20,000 times.

<sup>2</sup>*The Merry Vineyard*, while stupendously successful, was not even Zuckmayer’s most frequently performed play. The playwright’s work was banned en toto in March of 1933; that included all his published short stories, poems, children’s plays, translations (e.g. Anderson and Stallings’ melodrama about American soldiers in World War I, *What Price Glory?*) and even his

1926, Joseph Goebbels confided to his diary, “The play itself is pure swinery.”<sup>3</sup> In a way, Goebbels was right: the play prominently features a sow, and most of the action takes place in or near a barnyard. But barnyards became almost *de rigueur* after Hitler assumed power in 1933 because the Nazis glorified rural life. Propaganda Minister Goebbels was, however, particular in the choice of barnyards. When he and other Nazi officials called for more “Heimat-Kunst” (“Hearth and Home Culture”), the absence of Zuckmayer and other creators of “Abusive and Undesirable Literature” (*Schädliches und Unerwünschtes Schriftum*) an *ersatz*, or substitute “Hearth and Home Culture,” filled the void. Thus *When the Rooster Crows* and comedies like it succeeded, but they did so in an artificially created market.

National Socialism aspired to keep the German theatre tradition vital and was especially desirous of fostering comedy that embodied the “will of the people.” National Socialists saw themselves, after all, as stewards of all that was best in German culture. Once the Nazis settled into the saddle of power, they assigned comedy an important role in the task of “re-awakening the spirit of the people” because comedy “comes from the heart. It springs from the depths of the

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screenplay for *Der blaue Engel* (The Blue Angel). Zuckmayer's comedies, however, were the immediate target because they presented German “folk life” with a generally leftist political slant and were also extremely popular. They comprised 2% of all plays done in Germany between 1929 and 1933, a remarkable figure for a contemporary playwright. Leading the list was *Der Hauptmann von Köpenick* (The Captain of Köpenick), with eighty one productions and *Katherina Knie* with seventy eight.

<sup>3</sup>“Das Stück war einfach saumäßig.” Joseph Goebbels, *Die Tagebücher*, ed. Elke Fröhlich, vol. I, entry for Sept.10, 1926 (Munich: Sauer, 1987): 207. Goebbels and members of the Frankfurt am Main SA (Storm Troopers, the Nazi Party militia) disrupted the performance of the play on September 9, 1926 by throwing stink bombs and shouting insults at the actors. He boasted that “five women fainted,” but he was himself physically escorted from the theatre and the performance resumed.

peoples' roots as a nation," according to one comedy expert in the Propaganda Ministry, for "it unites us as a people."<sup>4</sup> Comedies like Zuckmayer's, while widely popular, had done "enormous damage to the integrity of the German people" because they exposed "life-sustaining values" to "cheap, easy laughter."<sup>5</sup>

German audiences nevertheless *preferred* cheap, easy laughter and wanted more of it. Playwrights and theatre directors were therefore under enormous pressure to produce "politically correct" comedies that also attracted audiences. Hinrichs' *When the Rooster Crows* epitomizes the kind of comedy that accorded with Nazi taste. At first glance it is a "peasant comedy" set in a rural village with action concentrating on the hardy *Volk*, foolish though those individuals may at times appear. On closer inspection it reveals itself to be a rustic detective story, in which the local *Gemeindevorsteher* (a kind of village factotum) is suspected of and nearly arrested for breaking and entering. In the end, he resolves what turns out to be a mirthful case of mistaken identity, largely at the expense of his neighbor (a greedy tailor). Meantime his daughter falls in love with the newly arrived veterinarian and all ends happily.

*When the Rooster Crows* had characters who featured nearly everything dear to heart of official theatre culture in Nazi Germany. They speak in a stage-adapted dialect which was originally in Plattdeutsch, and they refer to each other with the required number of barnyard

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<sup>4</sup>Wilhelm Westecker, quoted in Peter Bumm, *Drama und Theater der konservativen Revolution* (Munich: Verlag UNI-Druck, 1971) 130.

<sup>5</sup>Walter K. G. Best, *Völkische Dramaturgie* (Würzburg: 1940), 92. "[Sie] haben dem völkischen Bestand enormen Schaden zugefügt . . . weil sie lebenserhaltende Werte dem wiehernden Gelächter preisgaben."

abuses (*Schafskopf*, or “sheep’s head,” *Döskopf*, or “sleepy head,” *Torfkopf*, or “peat moss head”) to keep an urban audience amused. Yet the play also included some extremely subtle mockery of authority in the character of Police Inspector Kröger, whose officiousness blinds him to the nuances of genuine folk mischief. Kröger actually gains status, however, by allowing the folk to solve their own problems. That they do so in the end is less an indictment of official authority than it is of well-accomplished caricature. There is no barbed criticism here, only gentle parody.

Maximilian Böttcher’s *Krach im Hinterhaus* (Uproar in the Inner Courtyard) was the second most frequently performed comedy by a contemporary playwright in the Third Reich. It premiered April 4, 1934 in Eisenach, followed by 166 subsequent productions; by 1940 it had been performed over 5,000 times.<sup>6</sup> The play’s action revolves around a poor but honest war widow named Frieda Bock, who takes in ironing to support her daughter Ilse and to pay the rent in their meagre rooms in the courtyard of a large Berlin apartment building. She heats their humble dwelling with a small stove fired by briquettes of brown coal, as do the other residents in the building. One day a tenant reports that someone has been stealing briquettes from his bin in the basement; there is a cursory investigation which results in the building superintendent’s conclusion that Frau Bock is the thief. There is consternation among the tenants, leading to a demand that Frau Bock be evicted. Outraged by what she considers calumny, resolved to defend herself, and determined to find the real culprit, Frau Bock conspires with the aggrieved tenant to

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<sup>6</sup>These figures are based on surveys completed in archives at the Institute for Theatre History at the Free University of Berlin.

bore holes in four of his remaining briquettes. She then fills them with gunpowder and places them where the thief can readily find them. Soon comes the “uproar” of the title, as a stove explodes in the apartment of the actual malefactor, who turns out to be the superintendent himself.

*Uproar in the Inner Courtyard* is an imitation “Berlin Folk Comedy,” which achieved its greatest popularity beginning in the mid-19th century and culminated in Gerhart Hauptmann’s *Der Biberpelz* (The Beaver Coat). Many Nazi-era newspaper critics noted similarities between Böttcher and Hauptmann, while carefully avoiding any direct praise of *The Beaver Coat*. Nazi ideologue Alfred Rosenberg, after all, declared that Hauptmann had not really written plays but had instead “merely gnawed at the rotten roots of the 19th century middle classes and constructed theatrical pieces from newspaper reports.”<sup>7</sup> Hauptmann had nevertheless won the Nobel Prize for Literature, and the Nazis always tried to acknowledge him as one of the leading figures in their cultural pantheon.

A telling example of the Nazi equivocation about Hauptmann is the theatre named after him in Breslau, the capital of his native Silesia. They opened the theatre not with a play by the

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<sup>7</sup>Alfred Rosenberg, *Der Mythos des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Munich: Hohenheim, 1939), 444. “Ein Gerhart Hauptmann nagte doch bloß an den morschen Wurzeln des Bürgertums des 19. Jahrhunderts, konstruierte Theaterstücke nach Zeitungsmeldungen, ‘bildete’ sich dann, verließ die ringende soziale Bewegung, aesthetisierte sich im galizischen Dunschkreis des ‘Berliner Tageblatts,’ nimmte vor dem Photographen die Haltung Goethes und ließ sich dann 1918 nach dem Siege der Börse von ihrer Presse dem deutschen Volk als dessen ‘größter Dichter’ vorsetzen.”

Nobel Prize winner himself (as one might expect), but with an imitation of one—namely *Uproar in the Inner Courtyard!* The Nazi hierarchy thus paid tribute to Hauptmann in a somewhat back-handed way, for although he was never a Nazi supporter, he was one of the very few German playwrights of distinction who actually remained in Germany throughout the Third Reich.

Fritz Peter Buch's *Ein ganzer Kerl* (A Man's Man) paid similar tribute by way of imitation to another Nobel Prize Winner, namely George Bernard Shaw. Shaw's critique of the ruling class in Great Britain was agreeable to the Nazi hierarchy, and his Darwinian/Nietzschean ideas about the *Übermensch* found particular resonance. Extremist Nazis, such as those editorializing in *Der SA-Mann* and *Das schwarze Korps* (the former an official publication of the Party militia, the latter of Hitler's elite guard, the SS), wanted Shaw out of all repertoires. But Reichsdramaturg Rainer Schlösser (Goebbels' chief bureaucrat in charge of play selection) defended Shaw, claiming he had become a "half-classic" and "we'll get nowhere by fighting [internally] over him."<sup>8</sup> With the outbreak of war, the number of Shaw productions dropped, and in March of 1941 a general order from Schlösser went out to all *Intendanten* (managing/artistic directors of theatres) that productions of both Shakespeare and Shaw should be stopped. A week later, however, a directive to thirteen provincial stages countermanded that order. Then in July of 1941 Hitler himself intervened and said that all Shaw productions should proceed. One of the reasons Shaw was welcomed back, although no direct quotes from Hitler on the subject are extant, is that the *Führer* considered Shaw an Irishman and not English. At any rate, Shaw's plays continued to be performed until August 1, 1944.

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<sup>8</sup>Federal German Archive Potsdam, Number 50.01, file 217, p. 71.



*Ein ganzer Kerl* (A Man's Man) was indebted not only to Shaw, for it has traces of Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* along with motifs borrowed from Georg Kaiser and even the parables of Jesus.<sup>9</sup> It deals with Jule, who administers her uncle's estate. The uncle (referred to in the play only as "the Colonel") has suffered numerous economic and emotional setbacks on his estate since his son Stefan deserted him eight years ago to make his fortune in America; in Stefan's absence the old man lost his enthusiasm for maintaining hog barns, rotating crops, cleaning out chicken coops and keeping an eye on grain market prices. He therefore asked his twenty-five year old niece Jule for help in saving the estate from near-bankruptcy. Although she was reluctant at first to sacrifice what she later called the "best years of my life" to help her uncle in his time of need, she has turned the whole operation into a well-functioning, profitable enterprise. The first act portrays her as the best possible man for the job (hence the play's title), strutting around in riding jodhpurs, wearing a jaunty hat, and smoking a cigar.

Then the prodigal son comes home from America, his adventures over, ready to assume responsibilities (and supposedly the inheritance due him as well). Among the obvious complications his return creates is the displacement of Jule, as both she and her uncle had presumed her inheritance of the estate, presupposing Stefan's permanent absence. The Colonel assigns Stefan the lowest, most menial tasks on the estate, and there are several scenes in which

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<sup>9</sup>The title also bears unconscious irony, because Goebbels often referred to Hitler as "ein ganzer Kerl" in his diaries. A good example is the entry for March 23, 1925 in Fröhlich, 97.

Jule chastises Stefan for his shortcomings. As the play progresses, however, it becomes obvious that Stefan is, in the eyes of his father, the “right man” ultimately to inherit the estate.

He also hopes, of course, that Jule and Stefan will somehow learn to get along with each other. As the status of their positions on the estate pass each other (his on the ascendant, hers in the opposite direction) their dealings with each other grow ever more confrontational. The Colonel therefore plans a large dress ball to welcome “officially” his son back into his good graces, with Jule acting as hostess, dressed in her deceased mother's elegant satin gown. Shortly before the guests are to arrive, however, Jule decides to leave the estate on the next train.

Before she can change back into her accustomed work clothes, however, Stefan gets a look at her in the ball gown and confesses he should not have been such a cad and will in future be more sensitive to her needs. They reconcile themselves one to each other, and the inference is that (in addition to the odor emanating from the hog barns and the cow sheds) true love is in the air, as the curtain falls.

This play is best described as a romantic comedy, with attempts to keep a budding love interest going through a series of superficial disputes between the two romantic leads. Buch borrowed the obvious prodigal son theme, but substituted an attractive, eligible woman for the older, faithful son of the parable. He also used a convention borrowed from Georg Kaiser's comedy *Kolportage* (Pulp Fiction), which premiered March 27, 1924 at the Lessing Theater in Berlin. In that play, a young man reared on a Kansas ranch returns to claim his inheritance from his aristocratic father. *Pulp Fiction* was done hundreds of times during the Weimar Republic but

Kaiser's work (like Zuckmayer's) was banned in the Third Reich. The parallels of *A Man's Man* to Shaw's *Pygmalion*, the most popular English-language comedy on Third Reich stages, are more interesting. Instead of creating an ideal female (as Professor Higgins does in the Shaw play), the Colonel in Buch's play deconstructs a woman who was an ideal man. Buch then suggests that the exemplary man (Stefan) of the "new Germany" will care for and protect her as she assumes her rightful position, namely that of faithful wife and mother.

The Nazi regime idealized women and enacted several legal measures for their benefit as wives and especially as mothers. Women as voters had been among Hitler's early, enthusiastic supporters, voting in large majorities for Nazi candidates; they continued to be among his most ardent partisans as Nazi Party members long after elections no longer took place in Germany. As a result, Nazi paladins valorized female attractiveness and made the maternal impulse a matter of state policy. "Woman has her battlefield too," Hitler once stated, "[and] with each child that she brings into the world for the nation she is fighting on behalf of the nation."<sup>10</sup> Joseph Goebbels, who fathered six children during the Third Reich and conducted several documented sexual liaisons during the same period, claimed that "women have the task of being beautiful and giving birth to children, and this is by no means as coarse and old fashioned as one might think."<sup>11</sup> Plays like *A Man's Man* reflected and in a small way supported such official views; what gives those reflections magnitude in the light of historical perspective is how much they accorded with popular taste and how lucrative they were at the box office.

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<sup>10</sup>quoted in Werner Klose, *Generation in Gleichschritt* (Oldenburg: Stalling 1964), 177.

<sup>11</sup>quoted in Richard Gruenberger, *A Social History of the Third Reich* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971), 238.

Another standard of commercial success, and a clearer reflection of official Nazi attitudes on the commercial stage, was Jochen Huth's *Die vier Gesellen* (The Four Associates), the most popular play of the 1936-1937 season. It was a comedy in which all four of the leading roles were female.<sup>12</sup> It also offers fascinating insights into the subtleties of official cultural policy in Third Reich, while demonstrating the conjuncture of prevailing theatrical preferences and official postures toward women. The "four associates" of the title (Marianne, who organized the firm and is its unofficial supervisor; Franziska; Käte; and Lotte) have taken an oath to "die old virgins" and form an advertising firm called The Four Associates. It is set in Berlin and follows their adventures to find clients, their success, their romantic entanglements, and finally the breakup of the enterprise. Playwright Huth (who by 1936 had already written several successful screenplays) stated in an essay for the 1937 Deutsches Theater production that the women in his play "simply presented themselves to me, and I fell in love with them." The young woman of today's Germany, he wrote, "is not an object of sentiment, as in earlier days, nor is she a prude like she was at the turn of the century, nor is she any longer lascivious, as in the 1920s." What she is, Huth concluded, "represents a big question mark." Critic Otto Ernst Hesse stated that Huth did not create any prototypes of the feminine ideal in this play—and indeed the types he presented ran curiously counter to what was "officially" a female ideal. That may be why Marianne herself agrees to marry her boyfriend at the play's conclusion, but she seems concomitantly to entertain the idea of continuing to work after she gets married. At least,

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<sup>12</sup>Its world premiere took place at the Altes Theater in Leipzig on November 7, 1935; it had over 400 subsequent performances in the 1935-36 season, and topped 650 performances in the 1936-37 season.

she will not darn her husband's socks, which to some could seem a token of independence. In view of what was (by the time this play premiered) an official policy of discouraging women from pursuing careers, her sentiments appear almost revolutionary.

The only successful play written by a woman pursuing a career as a playwright in the Third Reich was Charlotte Rissmann's *Versprich mir nichts* (Promise Me Nothing),<sup>13</sup> and even the most sympathetic critics were inclined to denigrate it as a transparent concoction of comic formulae, the most obvious of which was the central male character, a painter named Martin Pratt. Pratt is similar in his childishness to Avery Hopwood's Billy Bartlett in *Fair and Warmer*, and in many ways *Promise Me Nothing* is an ersatz Avery Hopwood comedy.<sup>14</sup> Martin Pratt, however, has a grown-up obsession with perfection in his career as a painter. The problem, according to his wife Monika, is her husband's refusal to sell any of his paintings (which to the casual observer are quite accomplished), resulting in a severe impecuniousness that threatens their marriage. By the second act, Monika has decided to take action; she begins to market paintings Martin had intended to destroy, and since she offered the paintings to dealers under the

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<sup>13</sup>It had its world premiere on November 12, 1936, at the Staatstheater Kleines Haus, Berlin. It starred Marianne Hoppe and Viktor de Kowa, directed by Wolfgang Liebeneiner. It went on to seventy-seven new productions thereafter, performed approximately 700 times during Third Reich. Production venues covered the full range of theatres, from "first rank" theatre cities (Berlin, Cologne, Hamburg, Munich, Frankfurt, Leipzig and Vienna) to cities of lesser theatrical import (Essen, Darmstadt, Stuttgart, and Mannheim) to small provincial stages.

<sup>14</sup>The enormous popularity of Avery Hopwood's *Fair and Warmer* during the Third Reich marked a continuation of the play's success during the Weimar period. No other American play even came close to the number of productions and performances in either the Republic or the Hitler dictatorship. Between 1933 and 1944, *Fair and Warmer* had over 2500 performances in over fifty productions. The second most popular American play during the Hitler years was *Charley's Aunt* by Brandon Thomas.

name “M. Pratt,” most assumed she was their creator. The paintings sell extremely well, and the couple’s money worries seems to be at an end; but when Monika wins the State Grand Prize for Painting, Martin discovers his wife’s subterfuge and leaves their apartment, even accusing her of infidelity. Presumably, he has left the marriage as well. In the third and final act, however, Monika’s true identity has been revealed to the art world and the State Grand Prize for Painting has been withdrawn; meantime Martin has returned to their apartment with a painting he says is ready for the art market; he also promises Monika that he has grown up and will see to it that their living standards improve. “All right,” she says, but warns him, “Promise me nothing!” as the curtain falls.

While the play’s ostensible subject was painting, *Promise Me Nothing* was concerned mainly with that longtime staple of German comedy, the superficial domestic dilemma. Had Charlotte Rissmann wanted to include a contemporaneous reference to the profession of painting, her comedy would have been much different, and in all likelihood it would have met with far less success. The profession of painting in the Third Reich, like all other “cultural occupations,” had been “brought into line” (*gleichgeschaltet*) under the umbrella of the Reich Cultural Chamber some three years before *Promise Me Nothing* opened. The protection that umbrella offered to painters like Martin Pratt was to “de-politicize” both the arts and the artists in Germany—yet it did precisely the opposite.

Propaganda Minister Goebbels had assured German artists that the Führer was their most powerful and understanding protector because he was himself an artist. “Under his blessed hand

is today a new Renaissance age descendent upon Germany.”<sup>15</sup> In exchange for his “protection,” however, the Führer-as-artist demanded membership in one of several “neo-corporatist organizations”<sup>16</sup> (structured loosely on precedents set by medieval guilds), each of them led by someone whom Goebbels considered “politically dependable.” The formation of such organizations was part of the overall process of “consolidating a unified cultural will” through the administrative apparatus of the Reich Cultural Chamber. Martin Pratt, for example, would have been forced into membership of the Reich Chamber of Fine Arts (Reichskammer der bildenden Künste); otherwise no gallery owner (such as Herr Felder in *Promise Me Nothing*) could have exhibited Pratt’s work nor sold it to anyone; a non-member of the painters’ guild would have been unthinkable for the fictional “State Grand Prize for Painting” awarded to Monika in the play.

Such details are conspicuous in *Promise Me Nothing* by their absence, and they would have been ancillary to the play’s comedic effect in any case; but their absence is a demonstration of the “consolidated” nature of this play to begin with. It furthermore lent credence to the whole idea of state regulation of and support for the arts; a “perfectionist” like Martin Pratt, Nazi critics could argue, had the “luxury” of pursuing his “vision” without having to cater to popular or modernist taste, as had been the case in the Weimar Republic. True, both he and his wife Monika were starving; had it not been for the sympathy of their kindly landlord who allowed

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<sup>15</sup>Joseph Goebbels, "Rede des Propagandaministers an die bildenden Künstler," Rhein-Ruhr-Zeitung, June 14, 1938, 14.

<sup>16</sup>For an excellent treatment of the “neo-corporatist” agenda which Goebbels set forth under the aegis of the Reich Cultural Chamber, see Alan E. Steinweis, *Art, Ideology, and Economics in Nazi Germany* (Chapel Hill, London: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

them generous leeway in the payment of their rent, they would have been homeless as well as hungry. Yet the hallmark of *Promise Me Nothing* was neither hunger nor the absence of political content; it was Charlotte Rissmann's transparent imitation of Franz Arnold and Ernst Bach,<sup>17</sup> playwrights in the Weimar Republic who had, as noted earlier, done "enormous damage to the integrity of the German people" because they exposed "life-sustaining values" to "cheap, easy laughter." Charlotte Rissmann's comedy had cheap and easy laughs, too; but they were the acceptable, politically correct kind. They had to be. Any other kind would have revealed the ersatz comedy for what it really was: a threadbare substitute, cut to a fashion that all theatres in the Third Reich were forced to wear.

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<sup>17</sup>Franz Arnold (1878-1960) and Ernst Bach (1876-1929) were the most commercially successful playwrights in the Weimar Republic. They co-wrote eleven comedies between 1919 and 1929, one of which premiered after Bach's death. All were based on formulas of demonstrated theatricality and all enjoyed unprecedented popularity, regardless of the venue in which they appeared; they were equally welcomed in big city boulevard theatres, in local subsidized houses, in traveling productions, and even in opera houses, which were used to accommodate enormous ticket demand. For an extended treatment of their work together, please see my *Comedy in the Weimar Republic* (Westport, CT and London: Greenwood, 1996) 7-25.