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Broadway in Berlin

Two recent Broadway hits have found their way to the boards of West Berlin. Since American regional and college theatres are always performing plays by Germany's Bertholt Brecht, it's only fair there should be an exchange.

The question is whether Neil Simon's The Prisoner of Second Avenue, and David Rintels' Clarence Darrow offer audiences as much substance as Brecht's Mother Courage or his Galileo. Perhaps that kind of comparison is a bit unfair. The Brecht dramas are acknowledged as authentic modern classics by most critics. But even the most fanatic admirer of Neil Simon's comedies would not put Prisoner of Second Avenue on a par with Mother Courage – though both play's central characters suffer a lot.

Berlin critics, reviewing the current Broadway immigrants, evaluate the American dramas in terms of what the plays attempt to achieve. In both cases, the attempts are much more difficult in Berlin, not because the German casts are not as skilled as American actors in their native drama, but because the subject matter is less familiar to German audiences.

Writing in the Berlin daily, Tagesspiegel, reviewer Guenther Grack points out that, although Clarence Darrow was a famous American lawyer, his name and fame are not nearly so well known in Germany, although the

book by Irving Stone, on which Rintels' one-man drama is based, has been published there.

Neil Simon, on the other hand, is certainly a well known quantity in Berlin. His Barefoot in the Park, Plaza Suite, The Odd Couple, and the Sunshine Boys, among other Simon comedies, have all had thorough exposure on West German stages. So the comic devices of The Prisoner of Second Avenue are familiar to German audiences by now. Nonetheless, a large part of the comic effect of this farcical affair is derived from the fact that the hero lives in a New York high-rise apartment house and suffers from all the things that can go wrong in such a building, especially if the construction is cheap and the maintenance methods shoddy.

Apparently Germans can match some of the comic misadventures of the unfortunates of Second Avenue with their own disaster stories. Critic Hellmut Kotschenreuther, commenting in the Tagesspiegel, praises Simon as one of the best dialogue writers of the contemporary theatre. Whether he is scoring off slapstick gags or making a wry joke about the population explosion, Simon knows how to create comedy.

And since he can make his audiences laugh at both the broadest kind of visual knockabout humor and very serious problems, why not use the neuroses, the fear of life, and the nervous breakdown of a man as the background for a comedy? asks critic Kotschenreuther. That is just what Simon has done in Prisoner of Second Avenue – he has put his comedy centerstage, with a backdrop of fear.

For the Tagesspiegel's critic, however, that backdrop is not easy to distinguish in the current production at the Theater am Kurfuerstendamm. The reason for this, in his opinion, is that the star of the show, Ullrich Haupt, who also directed himself in it, is too intent on projecting the comedy

at the expense of any deeper meanings. He is an accomplished comedian, who knows how to please his audiences, says Kotschenreuther. Fortunately, his amusing mannerisms and tricks are first-class.

From the Tagesspiegel's account, it's obvious that Berlin audiences are having a boisterous time at Dachlawine, as Prisoner of Second Avenue is called in Germany. But, says the paper's drama experts, their laughter ought to stick in their throats a bit more often. There is more to this play than guffaws at the plight of a man who has just lost his job, his self-confidence, and soon after his reason. The German critic wishes, however, that the playwright had been more earnest, though he is pleased that the background of the comedy is at least serious. The German critic also wishes that the actor-director had played down the broad comedy, had avoided his usual attempt to please his fans, had heightened the poignancy of Mel's situation. The review in Tagesspiegel is titled "Bitterer Boulevard," suggesting that this is not the usual light, mindless boulevard comedy one might expect at the Theater am Kurfuerstendamm.

With Clarence Darrow, there are also problems – in the opinion of the critics – but they are rather different from those of Simon's play. Darrow and his career are not very well known in Germany. That is a difficulty. And it is not very well solved by Rintels' dramatization, which has Darrow himself telling the audience about his noble battle for black freedom, workers' rights, for the lives of the falsely accused, and so on. Die Welt's critic, Friedrich Luft, dismisses the text as a collection of law cases. A repetitive "Mammoth-Text" is Luft's considered opinion. As such, it is not easy for an actor to bring it to life.

The actor who has taken on the role of Darrow in Berlin is none other than the well known film star, Curd Juergens. Guenther Grack, in

Tagesspiegel, insists that Curd Juergens is Curd Juergens, and it is impossible for the audience to forget that for a minute. Even Friedrich Luft observes that the premiere of Clarence Darrow at the Berlin Komoedie was a social event – tuxedos ad evening gowns – for all Juergens’ friends and fans. Grack notes that the studied mannerisms with which Juergens tries to create a vision of Darrow on stage are more effects than characterization. And when Darrow comments on his love of whisky or women, the audience chuckles, because these are points where Darrow’s persona and that of Juergens come together. But the laughter is not at Darrow’s all-too-human frailties, or at the manner of his friendly admission of them to the audience. It is, rather, a kind of inside joke, understood by those who know Juergens or who read about his Jet-Set adventures in the gossip columns.

Clarence Darrow, in Curd Juergens’ impersonation, never, quite comes to life for either critic Luft or critic Grack. Luft points out that, when five years before film-star Juergens performed John Osborne’s Inadmissible Evidence – also virtually a one-man play – he had done a powerful job. The difference, says Luft, is in the texts. Osborne’s drama of a disintegrating lawyer was something a strong actor could bite into. Rintels’ reworking of Irving stone’s biography is only a long, long catalogue of Darrow’s cases and qualities.

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NEW GERMAN FILMS

Suddenly, film fans are talking about the "New German Film." Just what that means may not be clear to people who don't haunt art-film theatres. Everyone who loves the cinema, however, knows something about the "Old German Film." Who hasn't heard of Marlene Dietrich in The Blue Angel? And of her famous co-star, Emil Jannings, and of her director, Josef von Sternberg?

What horror film fans don't know the frightening vampire film, Nosferatu, of F. W. Murnau? Or the brilliant film achievements of Fritz Lang, with his villainous Dr. Mabuse, and his shocking future-vision in Metropolis?

The old German films are justly famous. And their directors and stars – most of them now deceased – have passed over into legend. But then came the Nazi blight, when films were primarily propaganda. And after World War II, people wanted to escape, to forget, to dream again. So the films were often beautiful recreations of 19th century romantic idylls, or of the pomp and glory of the Imperial German and Austrian eras. Not to mention scores of light comedies and idiotic farces.

Things got so bad, in fact, that it was almost impossible not to smile when someone talked about the "contemporary German film." Critic Friedrich Luft, who has lived through the best and the worst years of German cinema, says one really couldn't discuss the German film –

because there wasn't any. It had vanished somewhere. True, plenty of films were still being made. Some in West Germany. Some in East Germany. And some in co-production with Italy, France, England, or America.

But, insists Luft, there wasn't anything about these films that distinguished them from the majority of films being ground out for general release and eventual sale to television. They might have had German actors, German environments, German technicians, but they did not basically have any distinct view point, subject-matter, or artistic style, which set them apart as both specially German and uniquely new. Even worse, in Luft's opinion, was the fact that many of the films turned out in the 1950's weren't even good enough for international distribution.

Then, in the early 1960's, there was a kind of "uprising" of the New German Film, sparked by dedicated young artists, who were revolting against the commercialism, the superficiality, the irrelevance of most German films being made then. They were clearly inspired by the success of France's Nouvelle Vague, or New Wave, of film-makers. In France, film subjects were serious, anti-commercial, relevant. Artistic treatments of story, characters, and cinematic techniques were daring exploratory, startling. And critics and the public eagerly endorsed this new work.

But it didn't happen the same way in Germany, Luft says with regret. Certainly earnest, relevant films were made, but not many, and they were viewed only in rather small circles of artists and intellectuals. So they didn't carry much weight. They were for all practical purposes, Underground films. And it is notoriously difficult for such works to receive general distribution. Without such dissemination, however, filmmakers can't make enough to finance further work.

What the German public wanted to see in the 1960's – or at least what the major film companies and distributors provided for them – were a series of semi-pornographic films, heavy on nudity and sexual suggestion, and also a lot of inconsequential entertainment films. Not much to build a New German Film Movement on. Nor anything worth the serious attention of informed film critics.

Now, suddenly, says Friedrich Luft, it's all changed. One after the other, the great international publications are spouting praise for the films of the German Federal Republic: Newsweek ... The London Times ... The New York Times ... The Manchester ... Guardian ... Paris' Le Matin!

No longer are the young French film-makers at the head of the Avant-Garde. And they are no longer so young, either, Luft observes. No, the new leaders of the filmworld's cutting edge of experiment and artistry seem to be German. Suddenly a number of the young German film-makers have become internationally famous. Only yesterday, says Luft, it seemed that they were making their films for each other. But today, Rainer Fassbinder is a name as well known as Francois Truffaut. Fassbinder's films have had success in recent New York Film Festivals. Why the rapid change?

According to Luft, it's because the younger film-makers have learned some lessons. They have discovered how to be more illuminating, more understandable, more at ease with film – as well as more competent artistically and more skilled technically. Their earlier works were often hostile to the potential film public.

They made works alien to the film medium – or so personal, so inaccessible that most audiences could not have understood them. Now the films are aimed at winning a public – and there has been a gain in quality as well. This is one reason for change.

But there's more. Especially in the case of Fassbinder. Some critics are calling Fassbinder a genius. Actually, his work is rather uneven. And what amazes and delights some non-German critics about his films is often something – a character, a situation, a milieu, even an object – which is distinctively German, and as such, no astonishment to German critics and audiences. But the novelty of the foreign-ness of things German to non-German critics aside, Fassbinder has an astonishing skill.

Luft calls it "Hatching films." Fassbinder, for Luft, breeds, incubates, and creates films quickly and directly. Put another way, says Luft, Fassbinder can "write" on film in the same way that an author writes on paper. That is plainly new – and phenomenal. No one else can do this – or at least the man has not yet been discovered.

And with this skill, the artist Fassbinder, who yesterday seemed anxious almost to defend the murkiness and inaccessibility of this cinema, is today using film, as an object of communication.

Not that a big commercial success were today suspicious, a sign of sell-out or compromise. Today film-makers can offer cinema with difficult themes, complicated artistic aspects, and not fear that they will have no popular audience. The reason, says Luft, is the influence of television. So much exposure to various kinds of dramas and life-experiences, to so many styles and innovations, in the broad range of TV programming – all this has prepared ordinary audiences to understand much which before could only be appreciated by a very sophisticated audience. What was once elitist and impenetrable is now accessible.

Perhaps, says Luft, the praise for the new film-makers is reaching too high when critics suggest they will sweep away commercial films. Why should the commercial be destroyed, made unnecessary? asks Luft. There

