Why So Angry, German Theater? Crash Course Theater #27

Crash Course: Theater
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[PBS Digital Studios intro]

Hey there, I'm Mike Rugnetta. This is Crash Course Theater, and today we're feeling stressed, but also romantic, and sometimes classical. It's an emotional whatever-mélange-is-in-German, because we're exploring the German theater of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, when playwrights rebelled against the Enlightenment and bourgeoisie society by writing some really dark plays. We'll explore the enduring conflict between intellect and emotion and between society and the individual, and we'll meet a funny little guy in a hat called named Hanswurst. Lights up!

[Crash Course intro]

Germany didn't establish a theater of its own until late, and that's probably because Germany itself wasn't really established until late. The Thirty Years' War ended in 1648, leaving Germany a mess of 300 separate provinces and city-states. Most of them were devastated. It wasn't until the mid-1800s that the nation was finally unified. In the meantime, German nobles who wanted theater imported it from France and Italy. The common people had to make do with fairground stuff. Some of that stuff was provided by English actors. English plays weren't so popular, with Frederick the Great calling Shakespeare's plays "farces worthy of the savages of Canada". Oof, sorry Canada. Not-so-great Frederick, if you ask me.

But travelling English clowns were a hit, especially when they developed German characters like "Stock Fish" and "Pickle Herring". Heh heh heh, Pickle Herring.

Eventually, Germany developed its own stock clown: Hanswurst, or "John Sausage", a Bavarian fool who wore a green hat and drank a lot of beer. And that was pretty much the highest achievement of German theater until the mid-18th century.

The first serious German troop, the Neubers, showed how serious they were by barbecuing Hanswurst in effigy. But then they stopped making money, so they had to bring Hanswurst plays back. What can you say? The people wanted more John Sausage.

Germany's first serious playwright was G. E. Lessing, who was also the world's first dramaturg. In the mid-18th century, inspired by English playwrights, he wrote bourgeois comedies and tragedies about middle class German characters. These were considered amazingly realistic, and finally attracted a middle class audience to the theater. Around this time, some of Germany's first permanent theaters were built, which gave Lessing and other German playwrights a place to show their stuff.

Like sentimentalism in England, Lessing's work reflected the good old Enlightenment idea that people are mostly good and just need a little moral hand-holding. The playwrights who came after him were like, "Uhh, no". They looked around at the ravages of poverty and crime, and they argued that maybe people and society weren't so great after all. I mean, we've all been there, right?

The movement they created was called Sturm und Drang, or "Storm and Stress", named for a 1776 play by Friedrich M. Klinger that is nominally set during the American Revolution, even though none of the characters are American. It's a pretty silly play about family grudges and concealed identity, but somewhere in there is an argument for passionate individualism, and that's what Sturm und Drang is all about...sorta.

In fact, it's hard to tell exactly what Sturm und Drang is about, because as aesthetic movements go, this one wasn't the most coherent. The men who led it sort of agreed on what they were against—modern life, rationalism—but not really on what they were for. So some plays reject the unities and some don't. Some of them are really emotional and some aren't. There's an uncomfortable amount of rape and child murder, but not enough to, like, build a movement around. Not that you'd want to.

Writers such as Friedrich Schiller and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe were fans of this movement. Goethe wrote Sturm und Drang's most famous plays, Götz von Berlichingen, which was so long and so spectacular that it was pretty much unstageable. Schiller had a scandalous success with The Robbers, which got him temporarily banned from playwriting. In The Robbers, an outlaw is the true hero, and it's his wealthy brother, who is thriving in a corrupt society, who is the villain.

Both Schiller and Goethe later rejected Sturm und Drang in favor of what came to be known as Weimar classicism. Goethe was influenced by a trip to Italy, which convinced him that maybe classical models weren't so bad. Schiller took a decade off from playwriting to read history and came to the same conclusion.

Weimar classicism was a throwback to Enlightenment theater, with its faith in reason and order. Instead of using French neoclassicism as its model, though, it looked all the way back to the Greeks and Romans. Weimar classicists wanted to make a theater so galvanizing, extraordinary, and exquisitely beautiful that it would reveal some kind of greater truth. For 26 years, Goethe also took over the actual Weimar court theater in Weimar, Germany. Even though Goethe's plays and the plays of his admired contemporaries formed only a small part of the repertory there, he advanced the theater in other ways by training his actors in verse speaking and more naturalistic acting, and by rejecting haphazard blocking in favor of more specific, more painterly tableaus.

The German movement that followed Sturm und Drang and spread across Europe in the early years of the 19th century was Romanticism. As we discussed in Crash Course Literature, Romanticism doesn't have a lot to do with the shirtless-guy-on-the-book-cover kind of romance. Instead, it was a profound reaction against Enlightenment certainties and the social transformations wrought by the Industrial Revolution. Romanticism emphasized emotion over intellect, instinct over reason, and nature over culture. Romantics drew on the philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who argued that humans are at their best in a state of nature, and Emmanuel Kant, who wrote that we understand the world only through subjective experience. Romantics believed that humans are caught between an earthly existence and a higher spiritual existence. Nature moves us closer to that higher existence, and so can art, especially if a Romantic genius is making that art. In fact, the playwright Friedrich Schiller theorized that the only way people can reconcile with confusion between sensuality and reason, body and mind, is through art and the impulse of play.

Romantic playwrights weren't interested in realism. Their plays mostly took place in an idealized past and imagined future, or a far-off locale. Anywhere that, as composer Richard Wagner wrote, would allow audiences to escape from "the disgusting and disheartening burden of this world of lying and fraud and hypocrisy and legalized murder". Maybe worth noting, Richard Wagner was also a noted antisemite.

Romantics favored Shakespearean over neoclassical models and tended to avoid hard-and-fast rules about unities in their desire to represent passion and emotion. Many playwrights doubted that their plays could ever be successfully produced, so they wrote closet dramas that were staged only in the minds of their readers.

Romantic playwrights worth knowing include Ludwig Tieck, who helped with new translations of Shakespeare and staged Shakespeare's plays in the Elizabethan style. He also wrote his own

plays based on folk and fairy tales. Then there was Heinrich von Kleist, who read Kant, dropped out of school, and wrote some plays, including the dreamlike *Prince of Hamburg*. He wanted to have a romantic death, and after a couple of tries, convinced a woman to enter into a suicide pact with him. There was also Georg Büchner, who wrote *Danton's Death*, a tragedy of the French Revolution, and the wild, fragmentary *Woyzeck*, which is like a bourgeois tragedy spike with psychedelics before you die of typhus. I personally have been involved in three productions of that one.

To illustrate some of these movements, we're going to look at a play that has elements of Sturm und Drang, Weimar classicism, Romanticism, and probably some other stuff too, because it's very long. That play is Goethe's *Faust*, arguably the greatest work of German dramatic literature. We're only going to look at the first part of it, which was published in 1808. Like Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, Goethe's *Faust* is based on an ancient German puppet play about a scholar who sells his soul to the demon Mephistopheles in return for tenure—I mean, power. In return for power. But it departs from the legend and from Marlowe in pretty significant ways, some of them involving witches and beer. Help us out, Thought Bubble.

God bets Mephistopheles he can't corrupt God's favorite professor, Faust. This dude is making himself miserable by striving for divine knowledge. Mephistopheles is all, "Corrupting is what I do best!" So Mephistopheles goes down to Earth, taking the form of a sinister poodle, and follows Faust home to his study, where he makes Faust a deal. If Faust pledges to serve Mephistopheles in hell, then Mephistopheles will serve Faust here on Earth. Since Faust isn't one of those guys who signs in blood without reading the fine print, he stipulates that Mephistopheles can only have his soul if he enjoys a moment of perfect happiness, and wishes that moment—"Augenblich" in German—would last forever. Mephistopheles agrees.

How does Faust celebrate his newfound power?
First, Mephistopheles, doing the corrupting thing, takes him out for a celebratory beer and pulls a bunch of pranks on some of the other drunks, which Faust does not find funny. Then he takes Faust to a witch's shop and gives him a potion to make him look young and hot. While still hot, he convinces Gretchen, an innocent country girl, to sleep with him, helping Gretchen accidentally kill her mother along the way. Faust gets Gretchen pregnant, deserts her, and—just to make things that much worse—kills her brother. I mean, the literal devil is involved here, after all. Then Faust goes out to parry at a witches' Sabbath. Gretchen loses her mind, drowns her baby, and is sentenced to death.

Thank you, Thought Bubble. That was horrible.

Feeling at least a little regretful, Faust leaves the witch orgy and goes to Gretchen's cell to try to talk her into a prison break, but Gretchen will not go with him, and instead commends her soul to God. As Faust and Mephistopheles leave, a voice from heaven announces that Gretchen's soul is saved, which, for part one at least, is sort of a surprise happy ending? I guess?

We can see evidence of the Sturm and Drang movement in Faust's internal torment and in Gretchen's infanticide. There's recognizable romanticism in the radical individualism of a genius hero who resists taking a complacent role in a society and instead strives for knowledge and power and a connection to a higher spiritual realm before meeting a tragic death.

We can also see a deep vein of Weimar classicism in Faust's desire for a moment of beauty so profound and transformative that it's worth losing his soul over. Don't worry, Faust doesn't actually lose his soul, though in the second part after a few decades of adventures, he gets the better of the Devil, mostly because of a squabble over verb tense. Grammar is important, people.

Join us next time when we'll cheer heroes and boo villains and Yorick will probably get himself tied to railroad tracks because we're gonna be studying melodrama and it is not mellow at all. But until then, curtain.

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