ANN MARIE KOLLER

The Theater Duke

GEORG II OF SAXE-MEININGEN AND THE GERMAN STAGE

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To the memory of

LEE SIMONSON,

artist, scholar, set designer,
and teacher, who introduced
me to the Theater Duke

PREFACE

In the third quarter of the nineteenth century, the company of the court theater of Georg II, duke of Saxe-Meiningen, toured Europe, playing in great cities and small, for seventeen consecutive years. These performances, 2,591 in all, revolutionized the concept of theater staging and earned for Georg the title "the first modern director" and the sobriquet "the Theater Duke." Much has been written about the Meininger, as his company came to be called, but little about the education and training that shaped the duke's views of art, or about how he expressed these views in his direction of the Meininger.

It was long thought that Georg, influenced by the work of Charles Kean in England, wished merely to translate a historical picture onto the stage. Nothing could have been farther from his goal. It is evident that to earn the praise of such disparate theater men as J. T. Grein, William Poel, Henry Irving, and Frank Benson, and to put his stamp on the work of other reformers like André Antoine and Constantin Stanislavski, he must have done more than put splendid pictures on the stage. That is not to say that all his innovations were healthy for the well-being of the theater, for, imitated by less able men, they led to an excess that tarnished the reputation of the Meininger.

In this study I have chosen to inquire into two of the many aspects of Georg's activity in the theater: to look at those forces that shaped his ideas of theatrical art and to describe in detail the way he attempted to transfer those ideas—and ideals—to the theater. In other words, to examine, in his own words as much as possible, what he thought a drama should look like on stage and exactly what he did that made him the first modern director. Other aspects of Georg's long and richly varied life and

of his reign are not part of this story. The tours from 1874 to 1890, which deserve a history of their own, are represented here primarily as a chronicle of the productions given during those years. My comments on them are confined to details that point up some aspect of the duke's method.

Besides the collection of the duke's papers in the archives of the East German State Library, there are three great collections of material specifically related to the Meininger, much of it unstudied. One is the Carl Niessen Collection in the Theater Museum at the University of Cologne, which includes the papers of Max and Gotthold Brückner, the painters who made most of the Meininger sets; the duke's letters of instruction to them, often accompanied by sketches; and photographs. A second collection is in the Meiningen State Archive, where I was allowed to work in the 1960's, but which has since been closed to the public. There is a wealth of letters, photographs, designs, accounts, bills, and contracts in that institution, all waiting to be investigated. The third important collection—and very impressive it is—is in the Meiningen Theater Museum. The unsorted mounds of books, papers, and photographs that I saw when I first visited the museum in 1961 have been transformed into a researcher's delight, thanks to the efforts of Rolf-Dieter Meissner, director of the Meiningen Museum, and Volker Reissland, director of the Theater Museum. Housed in the Castle Elisabethenburg, the Meiningen Museum includes one floor of rooms that the duke and his family occupied. The paintings, furniture, and accessories are from their time; the duke's workroom is as he left it. The Great Hall, where the court theater first performed in the 1770's, is now the Theater Museum. In the anteroom are displayed posters, photographs, costumes, maps, and the like. The Great Hall itself is hung with some of the Brückners' original backdrops—one is from the very early *Hamlet*—and the set for *Wallensteins Lager* is on permanent display at the far end. The splendid ceiling and floors have been restored. At the time of my last visit, the old chapel was being converted into a music room, something that would certainly have pleased the duke. The Landestheater, in the city proper, has a number of restored backdrops used during the tours.

The state libraries of Munich and Vienna have Meininger holdings, and there is an abundance of research materials on theaters contemporary with Georg's in the London Theatre Museum. In the Colindale Newspaper Repository of the British Museum, I found reviews from foreign newspapers that are no longer available in their countries of origin. Both the State Library of Moscow and the State Library of Leningrad have

many materials on the Meininger, and both were generous in furnishing copies; much of this material remains to be translated into one of the Western languages.

One of the pleasures of working on a project of this sort is the company we keep while doing so. For providing otherwise unobtainable materials, I thank Director Rolf-Dieter Meissner of the Meiningen Museum; Professors Barry V. Daniels (Kent, Ohio), Roswitha Flatz (Cologne), Herbert A. Frenzel (Berlin), Kirsten Gram Holmström (Stockholm), Dieter Hoffmeier (East Berlin), Ute Kösser (Leipzig), Ingeborg Krengel-Strudthoff (Berlin), and Jörn Langsted (Aarhus); dramaturge Hans Melde (Meiningen Landestheater); International Theatre Institute officers Elizabeth Burdick (New York) and Irene Geysi and staff (East Berlin); and librarians Dr. Peter Frank and staff (Stanford University), Danny Friedman (Victoria and Albert Theatre Museum), Leslie Getz (Getz Dance Library), and Dr. Hans-Erich Teitge and staff (East German State Library).

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A.M.K.

THE THEATER DUKE

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INTRODUCTION

On an April day in 1874, Eduard Fritze, a loyal subject of His Serene Highness Georg II, duke of Saxe-Meiningen, Hildburghausen, and Saalfeld, paused to look at the notices posted on an advertising column in Berlin. His eye was immediately caught by a poster announcing the first of a series of performances to be given the following month by the Meiningen court theater. He read the details with astonishment—and with heartfelt anguish. He saw his provincial homeland making itself ridiculous by offering its theatricals to the capital city; and he could already picture the condescending smiles of his Berlin acquaintances.[1]

If any Berliners had even thought about it, they would have agreed. A guest appearance was a familiar event, but the guest had always been a star, not an entire company with its own scenery, properties, costumes, and orchestra. What could a tiny, provincial court theater contribute to the cultural life of a people who had already seen the finest in staging and acting? Within the past decade, Prussia had achieved preeminence among the German lands; and Berlin, just four years after the founding of the Empire, had suddenly grown large and supremely conscious of its importance as the capital of the new nation.

Despite his misgivings, on the evening of May 1 Fritze found his way to the Friedrich-Wilhelmstädtisches Theater to see the troupe's first performance. They were giving Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. He saw with satisfaction that the theater was filled to the last place, but he knew that complimentary tickets had been generously distributed to members of the press and to other influential people. This was not the usual theater audience. Distinguished and reserved, it seemed to be made up entirely of critics.

The play began. The first two acts were politely applauded; everyone seemed satisfied. Then came the third act. "The audience became all eyes, all ears, all breathless suspense! The viewers in the balcony and the loges leaned farther and farther over the railings. Then came the scene with Mark Antony! It was a masterpiece of individual and ensemble working together effectively, something not yet seen on the German stage. When at the end of Act III the Roman citizen Cinna cried out in a bitter voice, 'Rend him! Tear him to pieces! Everything to the torch!,' and the curtain fell swiftly, there arose a storm of applause unlike any the theater had seen or heard before.* Everyone jumped from his seat, shouting triumphantly and exultingly. Again and again actors were recalled with thunderous bravos! The applause would not subside."[2]

Julius Caesar was the first of forty-seven performances in Berlin that changed the direction of the German stage and pointed it unswervingly toward modern theater practice. Some twenty years later, the literary historian Berthold Litzmann commented, in a lecture to students at Bonn University:

> The impression made by the first appearance of the Meininger on May 1, 1874—they gave *Julius Caesar*—is difficult to describe. . . . You yourselves cannot know from your own experience what took place in a production of a drama by Shakespeare, Schiller, or Goethe on the German stage before the appearance of the Meininger; therefore, you can hardly imagine how that company affected us in those days. Everything they brought was effectively a new creation. One of the most worn-out pieces of the classical repertoire, *Die Räuber*, which so strongly bore the stamp of the Sturm und Drang period on its language and on its whole world of ideas that it was no longer expected to make any impression on modern audiences—yes, even that, as it was first given by the Meininger, seemed like a première. What Schiller, that most gifted poet of the modern stage—for Shakespeare created his dramas for a different kind of stage—imagined in the development of his mass scenes was first truly expressed one hundred years later. And that constitutes the permanent contribution and merit of the Meininger: they have set the poet again on the throne, they have made him master of the stage, and they have put the art of the actor again in its rightful place as an attendant art.[3]

Litzmann's words give some inkling of the extent of Georg of Meiningen's reforms, but in order to understand his work, we must first under-

* By the time Fritze wrote this article, 50 years may have confused his memory, for the poet Cinna does not speak these words in Shakespeare's play; a Roman citizen says them of him. But Georg did make such changes in his acting versions of Shakespeare. We will see another notable example in the discussion of the *Merchant of Venice*, where words are put into Shylock's mouth that are spoken by others in the original. For staging purposes on the road, Georg also often condensed the number of acts and scenes to avoid shifting locales.

stand the artistic conditions in the German theater before the Meininger appeared. In the 1870's, Germany had no national theater, nothing, certainly, comparable to Drury Lane or Covent Garden, much less the Comédie Française. In fact, for years there had been two "theaters" in Germany: the public, usually municipal, theater (Stadttheater) and the court theater (Hoftheater). Great cities like Hamburg, Leipzig, Frankfurt am Main, Cologne, and Breslau possessed large, often magnificent, theaters administered directly by city officials. Other public theaters fell into two groups, those belonging to a city and managed by someone appointed by the city, and those belonging to a city or a private party that were leased to individuals for their own undertakings.

By the end of the eighteenth century, most of the court theaters in Germany, once merely protected and supported by the ruling princes for their own amusement, had been taken over entirely by their noble patrons.[4] The ruler or his surrogate, usually the court chamberlain, made all the appointments, determined the salaries of the theater personnel, and paid their pensions. The theater manager (the intendant) was usually drawn from court circles: officers, aristocrats with artistic pretensions, noble lovers of leading actresses, and in one case, at the Vienna Burgtheater, the court theater of the Habsburgs, the so-called Head Officer of the Kitchens. Sometimes, in a progressive court, an actor was chosen, as was Ernst von Possart in Munich. Occasionally, a famous writer was selected to add prestige to the theater, as was Friedrich von Bodenstedt in Meiningen. These intendants sought out the best actors, the leading dramaturges, the most outstanding orchestra leaders and stage directors. Since few of them knew anything about dramatic art, they depended on agents, unless the ruler himself took a hand. Occasionally, they made a lucky selection, and if they were wise enough to relinquish control of the stage and its work to people who knew their craft, the theater might flower, but rarely was this the case.

That the court theater did not become entirely the plaything of the court was more than the result of lucky chance and destiny. There were aristocrats of conviction and taste, like Prince Kaunitz in Vienna and Baron von Dahlberg in Mannheim; writers like Gotthold Lessing in Hamburg and Goethe in Weimar; scholars like Johann Christoph Gottsched and Joseph von Sonnenfels; and not least, the great actors of the early times.[5] And there were the August Ifflands, August Klingemanns, Heinrich Marrs, Karl Immermanns, and Eduard Devrients, too, fanatical reformers all. Yet it remained to the ruling prince to seal the fate of the court theater with his means, his interest, and his character.

When Georg II became the duke of Meiningen in 1866, the state of the

theater in the German-speaking countries was at a low point. In the revolutionary period of 1848 and the following years of reaction there had been a break with the old classical theater traditions. Friedrich Hebbel was the last representative of the great German drama, and after him—with the possible exception of Otto Ludwig—came no dramatist strong enough to forge a new theater. The breach between the literary theorists, who decried the deterioration of the drama, and the theater managers, who were forced to fill their stages with whatever paid at the box office, seemed unbridgeable. In the 1850's and 1860's, only a few isolated managers—Heinrich Laube in Vienna, Franz Dingelstedt in Weimar, and Eduard Devrient in Karlsruhe—made a serious effort to distinguish their stages. Elsewhere, the presentation of the spoken drama was mediocre at best, and sometimes ridiculous.

The repertoire was trivialized to meet the demand of an increasingly uneducated audience. Anything to entice a public seeking light entertainment was reckoned good enough: French comedies, pastiches, farces, or extravaganzas so expensive that they had to reuse their decorations year after year.[6] The instability of the repertoire made the educated public mistrustful, then increasingly indifferent, before it abandoned the theater entirely to a less discriminating audience. On February 26, 1876, Josef Kainz, who was just beginning his acting career in Marburg, wrote his parents, "This is terrible! Not a single classical piece anymore. Nothing but operettas, farces, comedies! I detest learning them."[7] Joseph Schreyvogel's prophecy had come to pass: "The theater of a nation must be based on classical works if it is to be worthy of its destiny. Without a repertoire of such works, we shall have neither a tragic nor a comic stage, nor a public which knows how to understand them, nor actors who know how to play in them."[8]

Since no worthwhile contemporary drama was being written, it might be asked why the classics were not resorted to. Germany had a great storehouse of native drama, plays by Lessing, Goethe, Schiller, and Kleist, as well as translations of Shakespeare, Molière, and Calderón. Most of the world's great drama had appeared in Germany, often in distinguished translations; but the theater-going public had little training in understanding such literature. And, more practically, few theater managers knew their business well enough to engage directors who could do more than push one poorly prepared production after the other on stage. In 1867, in the course of six months, one of Germany's leading court theaters, with a staff of eighty including the opera chorus, presented sixteen productions new to the cast and director, including four grand operas, and gave new productions of six plays that had been done earlier, in-

cluding two grand operas. Such a program was common. Dress rehearsals were unknown; the most important person on the stage was the prompter.[9]

The actor had little time for training; he hardly had time to learn his lines. That actors could perform at all under these conditions was due to the *Fach*, or stock-character system, borrowed from the commedia dell'arte. Although the system was never a law in the theater, it was a universal and binding custom, often written into contracts.[10] An actor was engaged according to his category, and all the roles that by custom belonged to that category were his if they were in his repertoire. These were precisely defined in first and second categories, which were represented on all stages.

The roles in the first category were the First Hero, the Youthful Hero, the Heroic Father, the Young Character Actor, the Young Comic, and the Bon Vivant. The corresponding feminine roles were the First Heroine, the First Sentimental, the Heroic Mother, the Comic Old Lady, the Innocent Naïve, and the Soubrette. This basic group made up the personnel of all nineteenth-century German theaters, large and small; but the roles were not necessarily divided the same way in all companies. For example, in some theaters the Shy Lover might be played by the Young Hero, in others by the Fop. Every theater had a role book listing the categories at use there and the roles assigned to the first categories.[11]

Actors engaged in the second category held no exclusive right to any role and were almost always required to take part in the chorus of the opera and to appear in any crowd scenes. Among these secondary actors, the most important were the First and Second "Chargen," who usually played the roles in which emotion was exaggerated or carried to excess. Frequently these roles, although not always large or leading, were decisive in the drama. Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* was a Chargen role.

When an actor finished the season, appraised his velvet, and packed his paints, he compiled a list of all the roles he had studied, had played, and could play the following season. This list he submitted with his other qualifications to an agent, who then applied to theaters; or the actor might represent (or misrepresent) himself with such a list. This was his "repertoire," and if he was engaged for the first category, he had the right to play all the roles in that category and in his repertoire. The great temptation for an actor was to lay claim to all the roles in a category whether he had mastered them or not. This was a dangerous practice, for if a director had to substitute a piece at the last moment, the actor was supposed to be ready to play any role he claimed in his repertoire.

This system was to the advantage of the engaged actors, who clung to

their rights; and such rights were scrupulously respected by theaters. The disadvantage to the drama is obvious and can be assessed by observing only one category, that of the Sentimental. A tender voice, a soulful glance, were enough, says Eduard von Winterstein, to destine a young actress for this category, which included such important roles as Luise in Schiller's *Kabale und Liebe*, Gretchen in Goethe's *Faust*, and, as one might guess, Shakespeare's Juliet and Ophelia. Even a gifted actress would find it difficult to excel in these greatly different roles, but there was not a young actress engaged in this category who would not have stood on her rights to play them. They were in her category, so they were hers.

When the Sentimental grew too old to play Juliet or Gretchen, she changed to the category Heroine, with predictably laughable results.[12] The grand duke in *Der Prinz von Homburg* calls Natalie "little daughter," "sweet child" and "little niece," but the "sweet child" was usually a middle-aged and often stoutish woman. When Don Carlos whispered ecstatically to an Eboli old enough to be his mother, "sweet soulful maiden," the effect was ridiculous.[13] Lessing's twenty-one-year-old Minna von Barnhelm was in this category, and there was not a Heroine on the German stage who would allow this part to slip from her hands. "Is it any wonder," asks Winterstein, "that no one cared to see this piece, and it was given only to schoolchildren?" When an actress became too old even to attempt the Heroine category, she would be reborn, albeit reluctantly, as the Heroic Mother.

With Fach book in hand, even the most inept director had no difficulty in casting a play. He merely determined the traditionally assigned roles and chose those actors who had been engaged for the categories into which they fell. Suitability was rarely a consideration; time and custom had decided everything. The director did his part if he saw to it that the actor entered and left at the right time, stood on the right part of the stage, knew his lines reasonably well, and was not a nuisance. It would not have occurred to the average director to try to influence the action in any way. Even if he had had an idea for a new way to stage a scene, he would not have had time to work it out. And "if the director had had the effrontery, not to say the impudence, to try to give any actor of the first category any advice on how to play his role, it would probably have led to blows."[14] Few directors had the skill or the spirit to maintain discipline on the stage, and rehearsals became scenes of carelessness, capriciousness, quarrelsomeness, and selfishness. Any young actor with the temerity to introduce a new interpretation of a role would almost certainly have been driven from the stage by his colleagues, reproached for holding up the rehearsal, and accused of "arrogance," the one characteristic no actor could forgive in another.[15]

Since the rehearsal was the only place where a young actor could get practical instruction, few actors had much training. Even the court theaters, most of which fostered the art of acting for its own sake, and many of which had brilliant individual actors, rarely produced an ensemble. That drama was made up of an interplay of many characters, and that a small role might add to the effectiveness of the whole production, does not seem to have occurred to the average management. This was especially true of the public theaters, where the personnel changed from year to year. Even supposing an actor had learned to speak, he was not apt to have learned to listen and to react to the words of his colleagues. Each actor was absorbed in his own performance—and intent on defending it against any and all interference.

The formal, elevated style of speaking of the Weimar school had by now deteriorated into mere declamation; yet many actors continued to use it, although their colleagues on stage may have learned a more natural manner. Each actor repeated the roles of his repertoire with no thought of accommodating the style of another actor. Everyone played for himself. "Whoever could scream the loudest, roll his eyes the most violently, and almost pull the wings from their hinges—he was the greatest actor."[16]

Monologues were not rehearsed. That "wasted the time" of the other actors. Actors "indicated" what they were going to do; that is, cues were given, but no actual words were spoken except on the night of the performance. Nor did actors rehearse in the full spirit or feeling of their roles.[17] If a part called for great passion or stormy emotion, the actor showed he realized this by opening his mouth very wide as he spoke in his ordinary voice. So much was left to the inspiration of the evening that only a public lacking in education and taste could have accepted the results. Such were the practices on the better, so-called well-managed stages. The situation in the small theaters was much worse, as can be seen from the accounts of actors who started their careers there.[18]

The setting of the dramas was no better. In contrast to the elaborate productions of the opera, operetta, circus, and variety—for which the best artistic talents of the time were employed—the scenery and technical effects for the spoken drama were shameful. Most scenes, interior and exterior, were played in wings with a backdrop painted in perspective. Usually cast off from the property room of the opera, the sets were general enough to be used for every play in any period: "the woods," "the park," "the old German city." Furniture was painted on walls, flowers on bushes, storms on clear skies, bottles on shop windows. Few sets were designed for a particular drama; and when, on rare occasion, a backdrop was commissioned, it was usually a beautiful picture with little relation to the action on stage.

The scene was seldom narrowed; actors were dwarfed by the size of the stage; and since they had to move in a painted perspective, they dared not move upstage, lest they tower over trees or declaim into second-story windows. Little use was made of levels, elevations, or step units; doors rarely opened, windows almost never. The German theater at that time did not consider itself an agency of illusion. In a performance at the Berlin Königliches Schauspielhaus, the "first theater" of Germany, the ghost of Hamlet's father crossed the stage in front of the footlights, allowing his "incorporeal" body to block the audience's view of Horatio and Marcellus. The shade's subsequent descent to the underworld was accomplished by much grinding and scraping of the trap. Well, "maybe not at the Schauspielhaus—everything was well oiled there—but everywhere else."[19]

On May 8, 1874, the same week Berlin saw the first appearance of the Meininger, the internationally celebrated actor Ernesto Rossi appeared as Othello at the Victoria-Theater. The magazine *Die Gegenwart*'s review of the production was blistering:

> Without doubt Rossi is one of the greatest living tragedians. The company that serves as his counterfoil certainly does not contribute to the elevation of his art, but it does not detract much either. It is a shame, however, that the accoutrement on which the Victoria-Theater prides itself—not without some right—is in the case of the Italian star so unpardonably wretched. A Venetian street in Othello's day with gas lanterns and an inn sign on which the viewer can read through his opera glasses BEER SOLD HERE, an interior in Cyprus with dark red armchairs like those we are used to seeing in the waiting room of a little-employed dentist in a small town, Desdemona's bedroom with an alcove so drafty that the dirty red curtains had to be held together by a stagehand so they would not flutter—well, all that goes beyond being funny.[20]

Costuming was in no less sorry a state. Early in the century Count von Brühl, intendant of the Berlin Königliches Schauspielhaus, had attempted a small reform, introducing costumes that were historical in cut, tasteful in color, and in other ways attractive. Unfortunately, they were not particular to the characters who would wear them—young or old, rich or poor—and the actors resisted the change on finding themselves the object of laughter as they all appeared on the same stage in garments identical in cut, design, and color. So long as actresses had to provide their own costumes—which was the case until the end of the century—there could be little regulation of the garments they wore. Only the most dedicated artist would choose a costume to fit her role rather than to enhance her appearance. So like everything else in the theater of the spoken word, the