Hier irrt Goethe
Rediscovering the Satirical Operetta of the Weimar Era

Alan Lareau

“Give me four years and you won’t recognize Germany,” Adolf Hitler is famously said to have promised in 1933.1 In the following 12, mass exodus, murder and genocide, suppression and censorship, and the devastation of “total war” left a gaping crater in German cultural history that never healed. The Third Reich interrupted and often obliterated the blossoming arts of the Weimar Republic (1919–33). On the dawn of the Nazi takeover, a modest student endeavor took the German theatrical scene by storm: a last dance on the rim of the volcano in the impudent, topical spirit of youthful rebellion. Starting as a carnival show at the University

Figure 1. The Nachrichter ensemble (foreground) in Hier irrt Goethe in the Studentenhaus, Munich, February 1932. (Photo courtesy of Deutsches Kabarettarchiv, Mainz)

1. Though Hitler apparently did not use these exact words, he made similar utterances, and the slogan appeared in contemporary propaganda (see Kellerhoff 2017).
of Munich in January 1932, the operetta spoof *Hier irrt Goethe: 3 Akte Operette* (Here Goethe Errs: 3 Acts of Operetta) moved to Berlin, where its 10-day guest appearance that April was so successful that it was repeatedly extended to a four-week, sell-out run. It then went on tour through Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, with over 300 performances (Budziński and Hippen 1996:274; Kutscher 1960:201). Critics fell over-themselves acclaiming *Hier irrt Goethe* as the rebirth of the operetta and the cabaret. It was “the good, old spirit of the cabaret” and a perfect “expression of the times”—“genuine, great art! [...] not great rage but great laughter.” Star critic Alfred Kerr called it a “midsummer night’s dream, but with consciousness,” and scholar Arthur Kutscher praised the “technically and artistically surprising unity of song and acting.”

*Hier irrt Goethe*, a joyous romp through the day’s literature, theatre, music, film, and sexual identities, was a professional breakthrough and the beginning of illustrious careers. Simultaneously, on the verge of a cultural earthquake, it represented the end of an era and of a genre.

A slogan that dates back at least to the 1920s is more

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2. Quotations by Anton Kuh, Arthur Kutscher, Hans Martin Elster, Alfred Kerr, and Kutscher, respectively, from the program booklet of the 1932 touring production, *Die vier Nachrichten: Hier irrt Goethe* (*Die vier Nachrichten* 1932; in the archives of the Theaterwissenschaftliche Sammlung der Universität zu Köln, Schloss Wahn). Unless otherwise noted, all translations from German are my own.

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relevant than ever: “Die Operette ist tot — es lebe die Operette!” The operetta is dead, long live operetta! (see for example Kämpfer 2000). A striking cultural trend in Germany in recent years has been the renaissance of the operetta as an artistic form — particularly Berlin operettas of the Weimar Republic. As a 2014 radio panel asked: “Drastic, satirical, frivolous: is the operetta coming back to life?” (SWR 2014). For decades, operetta had a bad reputation in Germany as an outmoded relic of bourgeois entertainment, the epitome of kitsch, escapist nostalgia, and reactionary sentimentality. Looked down on as an inferior or trivial artistic form, it was often represented by inferior productions. But recent studies show this negative image of the operetta is largely from the Nazi years and early postwar restorations. The private theatres in which modern operettas thrived disappeared during the Third Reich. State theatres during and after the war treated operettas as serious works with classical aspirations, sung by operatic ensembles instead of being performed by singing actors and comedians like those who had created the form. Stripped of their popular and jazzy tones, scores were rearranged for large orchestras giving them museum-like classical pretensions instead of musical theatre vitality. Recordings perpetuated this paradoxically highbrow approach to what was once popular entertainment.

Many of the best stage works of the Weimar Republic and before were all but forgotten as works by Jewish composers, librettists, and songwriters were purged from the repertoire during the Nazi years. In many cases, the performance materials (scripts, scores, and orchestral parts) were lost (Clarke 2016).

But since German unification in 1990, this form that combined transgression, entertainment, wit, impudence, and rebellion has been rediscovered. The revival was in part a product of innovative scholarship in the 1990s and early 2000s. In his 1991 groundbreaking study Operette: Porträt und Handbuch einer unerhörten Kunst (Operetta: Portrait and Handbook of an Unheard-of Art; revised and expanded in 2004), literary historian, theatre critic, and dramaturge Volker Klotz argued that the operetta was a model of clever and subversive art that toyed with social class through sophisticated musical humor. Klotz pleaded for recognition of the operetta as an independent and complex art form: “Operetta is better than its reputation. And it could once more be what it was a hundred years ago: an independent, progressive, vital,
3. Under Gier’s direction, Heike Quissek (2012) attempted in her dissertation to systematize the German-language operetta libretto in terms of plot and motifs, characters, and form.

4. A 2015 conference in St. Wolfgang focused on Ralph Benatzky’s *Im weißen Rößl* (The White Horse Inn) and the work’s development, reception, and aesthetic techniques (Grosch and Stahrenberg 2016), and a 2017 conference in Freiburg examined operettas and musicals in Eastern Europe.

5. In the wake of this new attention and activity, the Österreichische Musik Zeitschrift presented a 2016 issue devoted to the topic “Operette: Hipp oder miefig?” (Operetta: Hip or Stuffy?), documenting both the misery of and vitalizing art” ([1991] 2004:15). He praised “the ironic and self-ironic playfulness, the joy of satirical attack, the anarchic rebellion against order” of the genre dating back to the composer Jacques Offenbach (1819–1880). Klotz urged producers to return to the original sources, unadulterated by subsequent generations. Only here, he argues, can one recognize that these are “musically, dramatically and visually rebellious stage works that attack fossilized and reactionary lifestyles” ([1991] 2004:17). Klotz followed his first study with another, *Es lebe: Die Operette. Anläufe, sie neuernlich zu erwecken* (Long Live the Operetta: Recent Attempts at Awakening) in 2014, in which, building on his work as a dramaturg, he pointed to unknown and underappreciated works that could be revived and produced with great success, albeit with revisions to the libretti—a surprising proposal given his previous book’s insistence on authenticity.

Meanwhile, a new generation of scholars has built on and gone beyond Klotz’s foundational reassessment of the operetta. In 2012, “The World of Operetta,” a large exhibit in Vienna’s Österreichisches Theatermuseum, attempted a historical tribute to the form with the intent of celebrating its overlooked vitality, as documented in its ambitious catalogue (Arnbom et al.). Operetta libretti have also come into their own as a subject of scholarly inquiry. Literary historian Albert Gier returned to the original scripts (as opposed to the postwar adaptations distributed to theatres), which he finds “surprisingly complex and multilayered,” to demonstrate their productive comic strategies—artificiality, intertextuality, absurdity—and their critical engagement with literary traditions and sexual behaviors (Gier 2014). Academic conferences in Dresden (2005) and Nuremberg (2016) investigated the political context of operetta and its potential for cultural resistance within and beyond National Socialism (Schaller 2007), and a new wave of scholarly and popular biographies of light music composers and artists has appeared (Frey 1999, 2003, 2010, 2014; Schwarberg 2000; Denscher and Peschina 2002; Clarke 2007a; Hennenberg 2009; Jarchow 2013; Sollfrank 2014; Waller 2014). While classic and forgotten works have been revisited with complete, historically informed recordings, the new status of the repertoire was perhaps best indicated when in 2014, opera tenor Jonas Kaufmann released an international hit album of 1920s operetta songs in German and English versions. Kaufmann enjoyed a rock star’s reception at his televised concert in Berlin’s open-air Waldbühne arena, reaching a broad audience and winning new fans for the genre. “It’s the first time in ages,” the critic for *Die Welt* wrote, “that operetta sounds fresh as the dew” (Luehrs-Kaiser 2014).

The newest generation of historians has championed the transgressive nature of operetta: celebrating sexualities and queer sensibilities, kitsch and camp—the ways the genre subverts dichotomies of high and low culture as well as those of heterosexual and homosexuality. Kevin Clarke, editor and contributor of the 2007 collection *Glitter and Be Gay: Die authentische Operette und ihre schwulen Verehrer* (Authentic Operetta and Its Gay Fans), is a leading advocate for such inquiries, also through the research and website presence of the Operetta Research Center Amsterdam, which he directs (2007b). In 2015, the Komische Oper Berlin mounted an interdisciplinary conference on innovative approaches to operetta history and production, in which the 1920s revue operetta tradition and gender issues figured prominently. The conference attendees rebelled against Adorno’s dismissal of the operetta as a trivial form. Building on the theories of Siegfried Kracauer, especially his appreciation of Offenbach, the contributors celebrated the “superficial” character of the genre as a tantalizing art of surfaces, “the pleasure of glittering, quotation-ridden, ornamental playfulness” (Brandl-Risi, Risi, and Komische Oper Berlin 2015:23).

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Alongside this boom of scholarship has been a wave of performance practice. The impetus for this renaissance is arguably the sensational 1994 production of *Im weißen Rößl* (*The White Horse Inn,* with music by Ralph Benatzky and others) in Berlin’s cabaret theatre Bar jeder Vernunft, featuring stars of Berlin’s hipster scene: the musical group Geschwister Pfister, Meret Becker, and Max Raabe, alongside mainstream actors such as Otto Sander and Gerd Wameling. “The division between popular culture and high art is utter nonsense,” said actor Walter Schmidinger of the production. Citing the model of Berlin’s golden age of operetta and revue in the 1920s, Schmidinger asserted, “Nothing is harder than entertaining people in a stylish, charming manner” (in Büsing and Baltzer 2002:98–99). The production of *Im weißen Rößl* stripped down the ironically bombastic show style of Berlin in 1930, which was modeled after the spectacles of Florenz Ziegfeld, to create a fresh, satirical evening of improvisational Kleinkunst (the “miniature art” of cabaret) in the intimate ambiance of a historical Spiegelzelt. The production demonstrated how clever and innovative popular culture can be. “A new day has broken for German operetta,” raved Der Spiegel (Sauerwein 2013). The performance was broadcast and released on DVD (*Im weißen Rößl* 2010), and it became a touchstone for numerous subsequent young and hip stagings. The operetta has also enjoyed new scholarly attention as the quintessence of the musical theatre of the Weimar Republic (see Hennenberg 2009; Tadday 2006; Grosch and Stahrenberg 2016).

Since then, high-profile stage productions have reinterpreted dusty classics, at times radically, and rediscovered lost pieces. Currently, the leading advocate for the revitalization of the operetta is Berlin’s Komische Oper, housed in the former Metropol Theatre, which was the central site for revues and operettas in the final decades of the Empire as well as during the Weimar Republic. Under the directorship of Australian Barrie Kosky since 2012, this stage has rediscovered the heritage of the Weimar Republic, the Jewish artists active in Berlin, and the robust queer culture of the 1920s. Kosky’s production of Paul Abraham’s 1932 *Ball im Savoy* (*Ball in the Savoy*) revealed in the opulence of the revues of 1920s Berlin and alluded to its gay subculture. Oscar Straus has been another rediscovery of this stage, with a reworked *Eine Frau, die weiß, was sie will* (*A Woman Who Knows What She Wants*, 1932, performed in London in 1933 as *Mother of Pearl*) in which one female and one male actor play all the roles, switching identities and genders or even performing them simultaneously. In December 2016 Straus’s erotic burlesque *Die Perlen der Cleopatra* (*Cleopatra’s Pearls*, 1923) was produced along with revivals of *Ball im Savoy* and *Eine Frau*, as well as a concert performance of Emmerich Kalman’s *Marinka* (1945), written during his New York exile and produced on Broadway. Even a time-worn work like Offenbach’s 1864 *La belle Hélène* (*Helen of Troy*) got a radical, queer makeover from Kosky. In autumn 2016, the Tipi in the Tiergarten, a sister establishment of the Bar jeder Vernunft, presented Paul Lincke’s classic Berlin operetta *Frau Luna* (1899) as a Kleinkunst extravaganza with a campy, queer slant.

Restorations and radical reinventions have breathed new life into old pieces. Returning to historically accurate scores opens fresh dimensions in many works. The original orchestral parts

6. It played under this title in London in 1931 and on Broadway in 1936.
7. The spelling of this title is inconsistent and controversial, found as both Rößl and Rössl (see Grosch and Stahrenberg 2016:9).
8. The opulent, mirror-lined tent opened in 1912 as a dance hall; it reopened as a Berlin cabaret in June 1992.
9. In 2013, following decades of cinematic adaptations (the most famous from 1960, starring pop singer Peter Alexander), *Im weißen Rößl* resurfaced in a modernization with the ironic subtitle “Wehe Du singst!” (Don’t You Dare Sing!) praised by the Frankfurter Rundschau as “the wildest fusion of an ironic Heimat [rural romance] film, surrealist folklore, and a sappy happy ending that German cinema could produce” (Vogel 2013). (Film producer Stefan Widuwilt had already been involved in the 1994 Bar jeder Vernunft revival.)
of *Im weißen Rößl*, unearthed in Zagreb in 2008, document the diverse, jazzy texture of the first productions. This score gives the operetta a fresh new character free of the cheap sentimentality long associated with it. The newly reconstructed operettas by Paul Abraham, which in the early 1930s were full of big effects and revue elements similar to the grand productions of Ziegfeld in New York, have proven especially popular revivals. The new wave of productions attempts to rediscover and revive lost traditions that have been corrupted and neutralized, and to dissolve the boundaries between high and low. Restoring the revue and cabaret elements to the operetta, these productions highlight its parody and irony, and often its pop and jazz elements. They reveal the operetta as an art of subversive humor, camp, gender-bending, and queer sensibilities championing hybridity through a wild conglomeration of genres, styles, eras, and identities. These productions often rub the works against the grain to explore their potential for cultural resistance — and even to insert transgressive elements that are at best only suggested in the originals. For instance, Kosky turned the *Ball im Savoy* into a 1920s Berlin gay ball and cast a drag performer in the title role of Nico Dostal’s 1933 *Clivia*. Besides camping- and queering-up the shows and reveling in trash aesthetics, the new productions often reinvent the tradition by radically reinterpreting the works and rewriting the libretti. Such stagings appeal to new audiences: young, progressive, hip, and gay. From Klotz to Kosky and beyond, an innovative synthesis of historians and artistic production is shaking up the operetta stage.

A forgotten example of this tradition is *Hier irrt Goethe*. Among the theatrical sensations of 1932 but today utterly unknown, it was created by the legendary cabaret troupe Die vier Nachrichter (The Four Newsboys). The ensemble was founded in 1930 by theatre students at the University of Munich working with Artur Kutscher. Kutscher, who formed his program known as the “Kutscher-Seminar” in 1907, was an advocate of modern drama, above all Frank Wedekind. He was at the center of a circle of new authors from Erich Mühsam to Johannes R. Becher, Stefan Zweig, and the brothers Thomas and Heinrich Mann. As a teacher, Kutscher was beloved for his devotion to his students. Before, during, and after WWI, these included Bertolt Brecht, Erwin Piscator, Ödon von Horváth, Ernst Toller, Klabund (Alfred Henschke), and Hanns Johst—all of whom went on to be theatrical and literary luminaries of the Weimar Republic. The performances of Kutscher’s students during the 1920s were the talk of the town. Kutscher’s students Kurt E. Heyne (1906–1961) and Helmut Käutner (1908–1980) were joined by dental student Bobby Todd (1904–1980) and the pianist Werner Kleine (1907–1980). They appeared in university carnival festival performances with parodies, songs, and dances. In February 1930, their spoof of Ferdinand Bruckner’s sensational play *Die Verbrecher* (The Criminals), under the title *Die Erbrecher* (The Vomiters) was a huge hit. Following this success, they formed their new troupe, Die vier Nachrichter, which appeared in the cabaret Simplicissimus and the variety theatre Annast; they also toured to Nuremberg and Stuttgart and were heard on the radio (Budzinski and Hippen 1996:274).

As theatre students and satirists, the troupe was solidly rooted in both local and national literary-theatrical traditions. The name “Die vier Nachrichter” alluded to the first Munich cabaret ensemble, Die elf Scharfrichter (The Eleven Executioners), a rebellious circle of poets, performers, musicians, and artists (including playwright Frank Wedekind) who used songs, skits, and poems to satirize bourgeois morality and the contemporary cultural scene (Jelavich 1985:139–85). Munich’s famous artists’ pub, Simplicissimus, boasted a more informal, bohe-
mian atmosphere than the rarified entertainment spots of Berlin sophisticates (see Diehl 1989). Allegedly, it was poet and cabaret performer Joachim Ringelnatz who brought Die Nachrichter to the “Simpl.” Later the revue and operetta star Trude Hesterberg discovered them for Berlin. Their fourth production, Hier irrt Goethe, was their breakthrough, reaching beyond Munich to become a national sensation.12

The students’ January 1932 performance at a university costume ball anticipated the upcoming celebrations on the occasion of the centennial of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s death on 22 March, and their operetta freely jumbles various elements of the Goethe mythology. As a poet, dramatist, and theatre director, but also as a scientist, theoretician, and civil servant, Goethe represented a cornerstone of German national identity. The script drew on three famous episodes from the author’s life. First, there is his early love affair with Friederike Brion, the daughter of a pastor from Sessenheim, near Strasbourg, and his abandonment of her (1770–71), apparently out of his fear of commitment. This period gave rise to famous verses known as the “Sessenheim Songs.” (His subsequent unhappy relationship with Charlotte Buff in Wetzlar inspired him to write his sensational 1774 novel The Sorrows of Young Werther.) Blended with this story is the invitation to move to Weimar in 1775 by Duke Karl August and Goethe’s intimate relationship with Charlotte von Stein, the wife of a court equerry (aide-de-camp). Also running through the operetta is the so-called Urfaust, an early manuscript draft of Goethe’s masterpiece Faust, copied out by lady-in-waiting Luise von Göchhausen at the Weimar court, discovered and published in 1887.

At the central axis of the Goethe story in the operetta is writer Emil Ludwig (1881–1948), who had an enormous success with his best-selling, three-volume biography of Goethe in 1920. The Jewish author, who was one of the most successful German-speaking authors with a wide international readership, became highly controversial during the Weimar Republic for his style of popular history chronicles, which blended fictional and scholarly techniques, as well as his outspoken democratic and republican sympathies. His Goethe study was reissued in a one-volume popular edition in 1931 to capitalize on the forthcoming centennial.13 Ludwig himself appears in the Nachrichter’s spoof, following on the trail of his biographical subject.

12. Following Die Erbrecher, the troupe presented the revue Das Herz-AG in January 1931 and the Brecht parody Wallfahrt des Mannes Orge nach der Stadt Mahagonny that summer. They also made recordings in January 1931, but these were not published or preserved.

13. Ludwig also held a Festrede (ceremonial speech) on the occasion of Goethe’s death centennial in Vienna: “Goethe: Kämpfer und Führer” (Goethe: Fighter and Leader).
Yet another manifestation of Goethe’s impact figures in *Hier irrt Goethe*: composer Franz Lehár’s 1928 operetta *Friederike*, a popular hit despite hostility from critics and nationalist circles. The libretto, which integrates original poetry by Goethe, takes enormous liberties with Goethe’s story, foremost by portraying Goethe’s abandonment of Friederike as motivated by his departure for a career in Weimar, as well as by having Friederike herself break off with Goethe in order to enable him to satisfy the squire’s condition that he be romantically unattached (Herzer and Löhner 1929). That the star tenor Richard Tauber, who created Goethe in the stage production at Berlin’s Metropol Theatre, was Jewish, as were the producers, brothers Fritz and Alfred Rotter, as well as librettists Ludwig Herzer and Fritz Löhner (Löhner-Beda), especially enraged right-wing contemporaries. The Nachrichter repeatedly mock the operetta’s cynical manipulation of history and its shallow, sentimental popularity. ¹⁴ Additional plot complications are introduced with the inclusion of writer and adventurer Giacomo Girolamo Casanova (1725–1798) as Goethe’s antagonist, alluding to the operetta *Casanova*, also produced in 1928 and thus a competitor with Lehár’s hit; this pseudo-historical romance recycled Johann Strauss music in a new score arranged by Ralph Benatzky. (That production was mounted by Eric Charmel, who also directed the 1931 operetta film *Der Kongress tanzt*, to which the Nachrichter refer repeatedly in their spoof.)

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**CHARLOTTE:** Wir müssen den Schwindel aufdecken, ehe es zu spät ist. Sonst wird die Verwirrung noch größer. (2.12)¹⁵

(We have to expose the swindle before it’s too late! Or else the confusion will get even bigger.)

The title *Hier irrt Goethe*, “Here Goethe Errs,” was drawn from an apocryphal statement attributed to the 19th-century scholar Heinrich Düntzer, who accused Goethe of not knowing the facts of his own life and of being disingenuous in his self-presentation.¹⁶ Düntzer has come to epitomize the vainglorious pedantry at the heart of academic criticism. The cover of the program booklet for the Munich production of the operetta showed Professor Kutscher triumphing over the body of the fallen Düntzer (Kutscher 1960:[177]). The students idolized their teacher, who presumably demolished his predecessor’s writing in his lectures, for Kutscher believed that previous discussions of drama were inadequate because they understood it as a literary form on the printed page, while the new discipline of *Theaterwissenschaft*, or Theatre Sciences, emphasized the performative aspects of theatre (das Mimische, as Kutscher called it [Kutscher 1960:77]). The ironic subtitle “3 Akte Operette” alluded to the stereotypical three-act operetta structure, in which the second act ended with a tragic breakup of the lovers and the third act (often dramaturgically thin) brought a happy resolution, and which was much derided at this time.¹⁷ The piece was presented as a collective undertaking, “Text und Musik: Die 4 Nachrichter.” The troupe of four (in which Norbert Schulze [1911–2002] had meanwhile taken over the role of pianist and composer) augmented their ranks with a small cast of fellow male and female students and a band.¹⁸ *Hier irrt Goethe* was first performed at a Munich student
festival on 31 January 1932; the Nachrichter were then engaged to perform the piece in the prestigious Kammerspiele and the Volkstheater in Munich. They were brought to Berlin for a guest performance in Berlin’s Renaissance Theater, organized by Threepenny Opera producer Ernst Josef Aufricht, opening on 1 May 1932 to resounding acclaim (Jacobsen and Prinzler 1992:15). (In Berlin, they were joined by the Lewis Ruth Band, which had accompanied Threepenny’s premiere production.)

Despite its parodic character, Hier irrt Goethe has an original comic plot idea of its own. Lehár’s Friederike ended, in a capriciously ahistorical twist, with Goethe’s departure from Sessenheim to embark on his new career in Weimar as Friederike Brion selflessly renounces her great love in order to allow his advancement. The Nachrichter take up this ridiculous conceit and turn it on its head. Herr und Frau von Stein, traveling to Strasburg, stop at a postal coach inn, where multiple character lines converge. The Steins, Charlotte and Josias, are in search of the young poet, whom they have not yet met, with the assignment to bring him back to Weimar. At the inn, they encounter Emil Ludwig M’Eckermann—the name being a satirical conflation of the popular biographer and Goethe’s secretary and confidant Eckermann (mecken is slang for complaining or whining). M’Eckermann is also looking for Goethe: his intent is to control the author’s behavior so that it conforms to the book that he has already written. Another guest at the inn is the Marquis de Casanova, here called Ganova (a pun on “gangster”), accompanied, as the list of dramatic characters informs us, by “Dessen, Vertrauter” (His, Companion) — who, thanks to the misplaced comma, is named throughout the script simply “Dessen.” (The joke of his name is only apparent to the audience after reading the printed program.) Ganova, who is on the run

Figure 5. Bobby Todd (as Ganova) and Helmut Käutner (as Charlotte von Stein) in the carriage to Weimar. Hier irrt Goethe, Berlin, May 1932. (Photo courtesy of Deutsches Kabarettarchiv, Mainz)

19. In the manuscript’s cast of characters and on printed programs, the character is called Emil Ludwig M’Eckermann, but throughout the script, he is Meckermann.
from the authorities and thus traveling incognito, is also in hot pursuit of new opportunities for seduction. Finally, there arrives the young woman “Friederike von Lehár,” also chasing Goethe and bearing his Liebespfand (token of love, presumably his child). As everyone is pursuing everyone else, often unaware of their identities, an elaborate game of costumes and confusion begins. They are later joined by Luise von Göchhausen, the lascivious and gossipy lady-in-waiting who steals the Urfaust manuscript from Friederike. The second and third acts revolve around the rivalry between Goethe and the disguised Casanova for acknowledgement of which of them is the authentic Goethe: a struggle that is not clarified by biographer Ludwig, nor by Goethe’s friend Friedrich von Schiller in a cameo role, but only resolved by the deus ex machina appearance of Napoleon, who recognizes the real genius—a winking reference to the appearance of the Emperor at the end of Im weißen Rößl.

All of this is preceded by a prologue reminiscent of Faust, giving the comedy an ironic context: a theatre entrepreneur wonders how to celebrate the Goethe bicentennial. In an interview with a press reporter, the director—a caricature of the Rotter brothers, who ran many theatres in Berlin including the Metropol Theater, where Lehár’s operettas were produced—declares his intent to fulfill his cultural mission by honoring the Goethe celebrations with a new operetta, a sort of sequel to Lehár’s Friederike—but this version will be funny, as the “lousy times” demand. The subsequent production is thus introduced as a cynical, commercial, and hopelessly unprofessional undertaking quickly cobbled together in an opportunistic manner.20 This concept built on a program that Heyne and Käutner had performed in 1929, before the formation of the Nachrifer troupe, called Goethe und die Frau von Stein: Der Operette “Friederike” 2. Teil (Goethe and Frau von Stein: Part 2 of the Operetta “Friederike”; Jacobsen and Prinzler 1992:12).

The class conflict central to operetta and other bourgeois Lachtheater (theatre of laughter, as Klotz called it in his predecessor study to the works devoted to operetta) is now supplanted by bawdy comedy. In the convoluted masquerade plot, the Stein spouses, unbeknownst to each other, switch identities and take on drag costume: “Well, there was terrible confusion there” (“Also, da war ein furchtbares Durcheinander”), Herr von Stein confesses (3.10). Charlotte, for her part, indignantly refuses to have an affair with Goethe to conform to M’Eckermann’s narrative, and so she accompanies Goethe in a coach to Weimar in the disguise of her husband. Stable master Josias, in order to protect his wife’s honor, dons her clothes and travels in an identical coach to the same destination with Ganova, who is in turn impersonating Goethe in order to avoid arrest, with Friederike and M’Eckermann also in hot pursuit. Such gender-bending comedy of mistaken identity is a staple of the operetta and popular comedy (most famously in Brandon Thomas’s Charley’s Aunt [1892], also a hit in Germany in the 1920s). Here,

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20. It appears that this prologue was deleted when the show went to Berlin and on tour. Heyne’s original manuscript contains a handwritten note “fiel weg!” (cut!) above the scene, and the programs for these productions no longer include the roles of the reporter and the director, both of which are listed in the original Munich program.
Weimar Era Operettas


the Nachrichter take it a bit farther to toy with questions of female emancipation, changing gender roles, and the new sexual freedoms of the Weimar Republic. This Friederike is no sentimental, self-sacrificing operetta heroine, but a resolute and self-aware young woman who can hold her own against the faithless Goethe—although caricatured in this scene as a calculating and manipulative modern woman. “I won’t be told what to do” (“Ich lasse mir nichts vorschreiben”), the strong-willed Charlotte insists for her part, refusing to conform to history’s expectation that she swoon at the poet’s feet (1.3). “That Goethe had an affair with me? Ha! And even if all of German literary history rolls over in its grave: Here Goethe errt!” (“Dieser Goethe und ein Verhältnis mit mir? Pah; und wenn sich die ganze deutsche Literaturgeschichte im Grabe herumdreht... Hier irrt Goethe!”; 1.5). A musical number extols women’s dominant spirit through the ages:

Immer ist es so gewesen
Und wird immer auch so sein,
Daß im Guten wie im Bösen
Nur die Frau herrscht ganz allein. [...] Wenn eine Eva etwas will
Dann hält ja jeder Adam still. (1.2)

(It was always thus, and thus it will always be, in good times and bad: Woman alone rules. [...] When an Eve wants something, every Adam holds his tongue.)

References to homosexual politics of the era surface as Goethe falls in love not with Frau von Stein but with Herr von Stein in the guise of Charlotte, and the frightened yet flattered husband is unsure of how to respond. “Do you want to make a whore of me?” (“Willst du mich zur Dirne machen?”), he protests as the author pursues his newest love. After Goethe has seduced “her” in a night of drunken revelry, they meet again as two men, and Stein identifies himself as having served with the 175th Viennese Regiment—a reference to the notorious anti-gay paragraph 175 of the German criminal code and the “175ers” as gay men.21 As they part, Goethe reflects on his new friendship by looking for a rhyme for his new “König in Thule” ballad, but can only find the rhyme “Schw...ester.” “This damned Weimar! There’s gotta be a rhyme for Thule...” (“Dieses verfluchte Weimar. Es wird sich doch noch ein Reim auf Thule finden lassen...”)—leaving the obvious punch line “Schwule” (gay men) for the audience to complete. The sexual aspects of the plot are played more for comedy than for political critique, and in the end, traditional gender lines are reestablished as the Steins are reconciled. Josias freely forgives his wife for her affair with Casanova, and she, for her part, never discovers her husband’s tryst with Goethe. Goethe, in turn, is desexualized (for Friederike’s suggestive Pfänd is revealed to be not a love child, but more literally Goethe’s deposit or debts to her father for lodging and expenses, which she has come to collect), and the celebrity is placed on a pedestal, solitary and silent.

Hier irrt Goethe lives on the absurd comedy of its intentionally awful logic and amateurish technique. The opening features a rural chorus (Chor der Landleute) mocking the conventions and senselessness of the genre:

Wir sind der typische, der erste Operettenchor,
der Operettenchor, der Operettenchor.
Wir kommen in jeder Operette nur am Anfang vor,
stets nur am Anfang vor als allererster Chor.
Wir haben ohnehin
mittendrin

keinen Sinn. 
Dagegen immerhin als Beginn etwas Sinn. (1.1)

(We’re the typical first operetta chorus, the operetta chorus, the operetta chorus. In every operetta, we just show up at the beginning, always at the beginning as the very first chorus. And otherwise, in the midst of it all, we make no sense. But a bit of sense, we admit, as the very beginning!)

This chorus always sings woodenly to the front of the stage, stubbornly adhering to their prescribed artifice. The next musical number is another jab at the clichés of the operetta; the “Weibermarsch” (Women’s March) recalls a number from Franz Lehár’s 1905 Merry Widow—and it ends, as do other musical performances, in a gratuitous “false exit” in which the performers senselessly exit to the wings during the applause, only to return to their positions onstage and continue their dialogue. Goethe’s solo is a send-up of Lehár’s “Tauber number,” the ubiquitous star turn for tenor Richard Tauber, and its shameless milking of the audience. Alongside the standard drinking song (“Schwipsduett”) and the military march number, the newly fashionable dance of the rumba cannot be missed. The obligatory waltz (“Weimarwalzer”), with its rhymes of “Rhine” and “wine,” joyfully jumbles the clichés.

Man braucht ja nicht egal nach Wien.  
Denn hinter Weimar bleibt alles zurück,  
Wenn in Weimar die Rosen erblühn.  
Im Parke zu Tiefurt die Nachtigall schlägt,  
Was kann da noch Schöneres sein?  
Wie man nirgends das Leben noch leichter erträgt,  
Als in Weimar, mit Goethe, zu zwein.  

(You don’t have to go to Vienna, because nothing can compare to Weimar, when the roses are blooming in Weimar, and the nightingale sings in the park in Tiefurt, what can be lovelier? Nowhere is life more bearable than in Weimar, with Goethe, just the two of you. [By the Rhine, drinking wine!])

In another, the “Tupenwaltz” (Tulip Waltz), Goethe jubilates: “Pass me some kitsch again / with your blonde hands!” (“Reich mir noch einmal Kitsch / Aus Deinen blonden Händen”) (2.9). This running critique of sentimentality and kitsch in popular culture is ironically double-edged as the performers wallow in it and take it to new heights of absurdity to the point of out-and-out camp. A trio of simultaneous confusions, a staple of comic opera, degenerates into utter, joyous gibberish:

WIRT: Welch Gerüche aus der Küche!  
Schnell gerannt, ach, schnell gerannt!  
JOSIAS: Arm am Beutel, krank am Herzen  
WIRT: Leicht ist etwas angebrannt  
CHARLOTTE: Welche Schmerzen hier am Herzen!  
(Leicht ist etwas angebrannt.  
WIRT: (Text ist voller Unverstand. (1.4)  
(Such odors from the kitchen! Run fast, oh, run fast! Low on money, sick at heart, how easily something can burn! These lyrics don’t make sense!)
in the first act, M’Eckermann imperiously stops the orchestra as they launch into their melody, complaining that it just holds up the plot (1.9). On other occasions, characters pointedly interrupt their dialogue because they feel like indulging in an opportune number. “Isn’t this an excellent transition to a new pop song?” (“Sollte das nicht ein ausgezeichneter Übergang zu einem neuen Schlager sein?”), Goethe proposes (3.4).

Constant comedy arises from the hackneyed Goethe quotations dropped in a new, banal context in the dialogue, as well as misplaced lines from other authors and popular songs. Groan-inducing puns fill the dialogue, such as plays on Charlotte’s name von Stein — ein Herz von Stein, eine Bank von Stein (heart of stone/bench of stone). Other humor comes from anachronistic references to contemporary culture — the depression and unemployed actors, popular theatre and films, and modern inventions such as the painkiller pyramidon and the bicycle. The crew even stoops to toilet humor as characters keep struggling to get into the bathroom, where one can also change clothes and emerge as a different character.

Yet despite its emphatically primitive humor, the operetta goes beyond farce and silliness. “There is not just the comic effect,” critic Alfred Kerr wrote, “but there is something latently serious beyond or beneath it” (in Jacobsen and Prinzler 1992:41). At heart, Hier irrt Goethe is an ironic discourse on the politics of historical narrative as biography, theory, and authority: Who tells the story, and who controls the accounts? The show is a send-up of the multiple mistakes, falsehoods, and misrepresentations that underlie memory.

The most obvious tracks of the operetta’s satire are directed at literary history in the person of biographer Emil Ludwig, alias M’Eckermann. Here, the Nachrichter build on and develop a critique already found in the 1908 cabaret sketch “Goethe im Examen” (Goethe in the Exam) by Egon Friedell and Alfred Polgar, a classic lampoon of academic pomposity. In that routine, professors test a lazy student (actually Goethe who stands in for the student). Confronted with questions on specific facts as well as interpretations, Goethe fails the exam on his own life and work and is condemned as an insult to national honor, while a conformist student mechanically answers all questions “correctly” to earn unanimous praise: “That’s education!” (“Das ist Bildung”) (Budzinksi 1964:146; Kühn [1987] 2001:95). When the old sketch was revived in cabarets in honor of the Goethe centennial, its relevance was evident.

The Nachrichter do not attempt a systematic analysis of Emil Ludwig’s psychologizing, at times emotionally bombastic biographies, but as satire, they just offer a ludicrously superficial caricature of the star historian who insists on single-handedly determining the narrative. In truth, Ludwig did not make the sensationalist pronouncement that Goethe and Frau von Stein had a sexual relationship, the assertion that forms the core of the operetta’s plot. At the same time, the character M’Eckermann shows no interest, be it prurient or just sympathetic, in his subjects’ private and emotional lives, but is instead egocentrically detached, obsessed solely with his own authority. Of his subject Goethe, he explains:

Ich kenne ihn leider noch nicht. Wenn er nun so lebt, wie ich geschrieben habe, ist es ja gut. Die Biographie ist die wenigste Arbeit, aber das Aufpassen, daß sie auch stimmt. Diese Dichterprinzen sind unzuverlässig. Ich werde seinen Lebenslauf überwachen müssen. (1.3)

(I’m afraid I don’t know him yet. As long as he lives the way I wrote it, everything’s okay. The biography is the least of one’s work—but assuring that it’s correct! These gentleman poets are unreliable. I’ll have to supervise his resumé.)

22. In his introduction to the English-language edition of his Goethe biography, penned as a letter to George Bernard Shaw, he says that his intent is to “display in a slowly-moving panorama the landscapes of his soul” (Ludwig 1928:iv).
Alan Lareau

22. Emelka, the film studio in Geiselgasteig, was the Munich pendant to Ufa’s Babelsberg; it went into bankruptcy in 1932. The studio then became the Bavaria Film AG and is today the Bavaria Film GmbH. The Nachrichter had themselves put in a cameo appearance in the Emelka war film *Kreuzer Emden* in 1932.

This biographer is so insistent that events conform to his version of the story that he compels Ganova to continue his masquerade:


(Dear Count, don’t make a poor poet like me unhappy. I already described everything this way. I was so happy that everything was right with Frau von Stein. Now it doesn’t work. Do me a favor, stay Goethe.)

Urging Friederike, who knows the truth, to accept his lies, he urges, “Come on, sweetheart, there’s no use in resisting literary history” (Kommen Sie, mein Fräulein, es hat keinen Zweck, sich gegen die Literaturgeschichte aufzulehnen; 3.8). The students relentlessly mock the legend-building distortion of Goethe, above all the idealization of the banal and ridiculous that they anticipate in the coming centenary festivities.

Emil Ludwig’s biography was controversial, even somewhat disreputable, among intellectuals for its novelesque passages expressed through the eyes of his subject. To further ridicule the reckless fictionalization of history, the Nachrichter refer repeatedly to Lehár’s *Friederike* and the film operetta *Der Kongress tanzt*, a retelling of the events surrounding the Congress of Vienna, or as the Nachrichter put it, “Der Konkurs tanzt” (bankruptcy dances; 2.5). This world is not just financially but also emotionally bankrupt, and the romantic fantasies offered by tenor Richard Tauber or film icons Lilian Harvey and Willy Fritsch are but empty sentimentality and cliché. The Nachrichter lampoon the militaristic mythologies constructed by modern film productions in the most explicitly political song, “Ufamännchens Wachtparade,” the title of which alludes to the instrumental old chestnut “Heinzelmännchens Wachtparade” (“The Brownies’ Guard Parade” by Kurt Noack, 1912). Here each of the male protagonists appears in a different soldier’s uniform. While the first verse, from the Prussian Uhlan, or lancer, mocks the reactionary sentiments in the so-called Fridericus films of Alfred Hugenberg’s Ufa (“Augen rechts, die ganze Produktion!” [The entire production, eyes to the right!]); the second verse, from the Kosak (“Augen links, die ganze Produktion!” [Eyes to the left!]); the third verse from the Bavarian extra (EDELSTATIST) decries the Edelkitsch escapist romances of Munich’s Emelka studios (“Augen zu — die ganze Produktion!” [Everybody close your eyes!])). In classic cabaret fashion, all ideological positions are mocked equally; “Throw
The complete lyrics to “Ufamännchens Wachtparade” are reprinted in Budzinski (1964:301–02). Modern historians, who emphasize the progressive sympathies of the cabaret tradition, often quote only the first verse, which critiques Ufa’s right-wing sentiments, while they ignore the subsequent satire of left-wing and escapist films.

24. The complete lyrics to “Ufamännchens Wachtparade” are reprinted in Budzinski (1964:301–02). Modern historians, who emphasize the progressive sympathies of the cabaret tradition, often quote only the first verse, which critiques Ufa’s right-wing sentiments, while they ignore the subsequent satire of left-wing and escapist films.
As Ganova complains, “In this house, nobody seems to be what he pretends to be” (“In diesem Hause scheint ja keiner das zu sein, was er vorgibt”; 2.14). But the taunting conclusion is vague and disappointing: what is the “different” way we should try to understand our world? We are left with humorous skepticism as the only answer in the midst of chaos.

The real power of Hier irrt Goethe was not in the script but in the performance, and thus its effect is difficult to recapture today. Reviewers repeatedly wrote that they had not laughed so hard for years. This was fast-paced, madcap comedy, with some actors playing double roles, combining overstated amateurishness with clever artfulness. Critics raved about the youthfulness of the production, the carefree spirit and the freedom from the cynical routine that characterized much of contemporary theatre and cabaret. It is also likely that the actors spiced up their show with improvisations, as Schultze says they did in a later program (1995:39).

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The musical score of 15 numbers, of which three are reprises, was a joint effort of Todd, Heyne, and Schultze; Käutner was unmusical and unable to carry a tune, so he designed the sets instead. The music in the style of dance tunes and popular songs earned little attention in its own right; the reviewer in Berlin’s Montag Morgen newspaper complained that just as the satire was not radical enough, the music was not parodic and was essentially just conventional popular music. The written score (consisting of just 28 manuscript pages25) gives only the musical outline of the numbers, and cannot suggest the musical humor the troupe brought to the melodies. The ensemble’s renditions as preserved on recordings—unfortunately, they never captured any of their numbers from Goethe on record—show the richness of their comic effects and improvisations, such as Sprechgesang and schmaltzy harmonies, comic tones and inflections, instrumental sounds and noise effects. Their style recalls the more grotesque numbers of the ensemble Comedian Harmonists, but without the trained singing voices of their more famous contemporaries, the Nachrichter were more raucous and comic, and at times hilariously deadpan (Die vier Nachrichter 2000).26

Another performative dimension that is difficult to reproduce in retrospect is dance, which played a considerable role in the production, highlighting the grotesque and absurd nature of the operetta in waltzes, marches, and the fashionable rumba. For Alfred Kerr, a highlight of the show was when Helmut Käutner danced gracefully in drag, while still wearing his cuffed boots. Indeed, Kerr wrote, the actors were best when they were singing and dancing, rather than in

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25. One page appears to be a modern insertion, and two pages of the overture are missing from the manuscript.
26. In the 1990s, Norbert Schultze arranged some of the Nachrichter songs for the group Drops, a madrigal and barbershop ensemble in the style of the Comedian Harmonists, who released several on their CD (Drops 1997).
the dialogue (in Jacobsen and Prinzler 1992:38–41). Schultze later recalled Käutner’s dancing the cancan in drag (1995:27). A fictitious dance troupe, Six Erlking’s Daughters, stepped in for the finale and other musical production numbers; their “senseless marching” (“sinnloses Marschieren”; 3.4) ridiculed the absurdity of the ubiquitous chorus girls.27

Granted, one could question whether this work is really an operetta at all. The manuscript and the first program booklet refer to the work as “Drei Akte Operette,” but once it went to Berlin and on tour, the subtitle was changed to indicate that it was a “Literarische Posse mit Gesang und Tanz in drei Akten” (literary comedy with song and dance in three acts), which more accurately characterizes the informal character and the incidental function of the score—a Posse being a regional comedy or farce. *Hier irrt Goethe* is a parody with music, but does not display the ambitious musical unity we now associate with the classical operetta. Yet it fits solidly into the tradition of the comic musical burlesques that were a core of the operetta tradition and popular theatre from Offenbach and Nestroy to *Im weißen Rößl*: ultimately, it even crowns this heritage as a brazily self-reflective meta-operetta.

Encouraged by their success, the Nachrichter quit their studies and became full-time performers.28 They followed their hit with a satirical parody of the Greek fable of “The Ass and His Shadow” (*Der Esel ist los: Songspiel in 9 Bildern nach dem Altgriechischen des Plagiates*, February 1933), which enjoyed over 200 performances, and then a spoof of detective novels (Die Nervensäge, May 1934). Before they could premiere their next program in fall of 1935, however, the troupe was banned as “destructive and subversive” and not in line with the National Socialist spirit (Jacobsen and Prinzler 1992:18).29

The troupe shattered and scattered. Pianist and composer Norbert Schultze had already left in the summer of 1932 to pursue work as a theatre composer; he gained fame for his musical setting of the song “Lili Marleen” and infamy for his songs and scores for Nazi propaganda films (“Bomben auf Engeland,” 1940; Kolberg, 1945). He was replaced by a string of other musicians, who all went under Schultze’s pseudonym Frank Norbert.30 In March 1934, the Jewish Bobby Todd was officially excluded from the ensemble, and Käutner and Heyne were admitted to the compulsory Nazi Stage Union, but Todd continued to appear and record with his partners as a guest performer until he fled Germany for Italy in 1936. Heyne, for his part, was expelled from the Reich Chamber of Literature due to his marriage to a Jewish woman, and in 1938, he emigrated to Switzerland. Käutner remained behind in Germany, where he began his career directing the films for which he is today remembered (*Wir machen Musik*, 1942; *Große Freiheit Nr. 7*, 1944; Unter den Brücken, 1946; Ludwig II.—Glanz und Ende eines Königs, 1955; Der Hauptmann von Köpenick, 1956).

In a 2004 essay on the artistic crisis and innovations of the operetta in the late Weimar Republic, Wolfgang Jansen notes that the experiments in the genre around 1930, some of which had proven dead ends while others held promise for renewal, were radically broken off by the Third Reich (Jansen 2004:59–61). This loss of a vital tradition has become a new focus

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27. In the Berlin production and on tour, the dance troupe was replaced by a solo dancer.

28. The troupe was often referred to just as “Die Nachrichter,” as there were really only three core members, with changing pianists under the pseudonym “Frank Norbert.” It was presumably under this shorter name that the group officially re-founded itself as a touring ensemble after a breakup at the end of the *Goethe* run, but contemporary programs and record labels still refer to “Die vier Nachrichter.”

29. Käutner reworked their last script, *Der Apfel ist ab*, in 1938 for the Kabaret der Komiker, where it was successfully produced in a one–act version that September. He also directed a film adaptation of the piece in 1948, in which he starred alongside Bobby Todd.

30. Schultze returned to work with the troupe in 1934; his 1936 children’s opera *Schwarzer Peter* was particularly successful.
of operetta research. The Dresden and Nuremberg conferences (2005, 2016) exposed the gap in German cultural history due to the catastrophe of the Third Reich. “Too much has yet to be researched in this enormous field of operetta,” the catalogue to the exhibit “World of Operetta” lamented, “and is just waiting to be awakened from its Sleeping Beauty slumbers” (Arnbom et al. 2011:99). Kevin Clarke claims in the same catalogue that the Nazi era has had a lasting and pernicious influence on the image and style of the operetta:

And so the creative and intellectually challenging operetta — as Offenbach first created it — is still banned from state stages. Even productions of works that are really indebted to this original ideal of the genre, such as *Die Fledermaus*, *Orpheus in the Underworld*, the *White Horse Inn* or *Countess Maritza* are played in a far more nostalgic style than their composers could have ever imagined. You can see that as the belated triumph of Hans Severus Ziegler, the organizer of the 1938 Dusseldorf exhibit of “Degenerate Music.” (in Arnbom et al. 2011:165)

*Hier irrt Goethe* is a prime example of the interrupted tradition and lost promise of the Weimar operetta. With its irreverent, topical, cabaret style, its queer sensibility, and its anarchic rebellion against cultural authority, this is the quintessential art of impudence and subversion, now being hailed as a rebirth. It has all the hallmarks of the genre celebrating a revival today: silliness and impudence, topicality and satire, camp and trash, and gender-bending. And yet this peripatetic piece remains lost. Why did this once hugely successful work drop out of our memory? Admittedly, it was written expressly for this troupe — *auf den Leib geschrieben* — and it depended on their performances and their personalities, so it was not designed as a piece for other theatrical groups. And then, just over a year after it closed, the ensemble was banned and went their separate ways. The script and score were never printed, hit songs were not issued as sheet music or recordings; only a single stage photograph of the production appeared in the press. No theatrical publisher took it on for distribution, and the manuscript was long believed lost.31 *Hier irrt Goethe* is therefore also representative of the lost generation of talented, young artists who were on the cusp of fame just as the Nazis came to power: writers, composers, and performers whose careers were broken off by persecution, exile, and enforced silence or conformity, and whose voices were lost in the wake of the pivotal year 1933.

This is but one of a body of lost and forgotten works that merit rediscovery. Admittedly, its topical allusions (above all the Goethe Year of 1932 and the now-forgotten Goethe biography of Emil Ludwig) may hinder its appeal for modern audiences, and this is clearly a piece that is heavily dependent on the spirit of the ensemble — a light-hearted, youthful style arguably lost today, in an age where much operetta still suffers from bombastic high-culture ambitions, and where cabaret is all too often didactic and dogmatic rather than irreverent.

At the urging of composer Norbert Schultze, the work was once revived by the Lübecker Sommeroperette in 1999 on the occasion of Goethe’s 250th birthday, but it only ran for a few performances as a benefit production and went unnoticed in the broader musical theatre scene. The local press reception was kind but vague: the usual benevolent but empty promotional puff pieces local newspapers produce today. One reported “musical and literary fireworks [...] whereby fireworks means teasingly pouring a master’s quiz of parodied prose, quotations, apercu, history, in a more or less explicit manner, with melodies, songs, even a detective movie

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31. In 1999, when the operetta was performed in Lübeck, the press releases touted the work a “reconstruction” by Norbert Schultze from memory and notes, as the original was said to have been lost during the war. In fact, two postwar transcriptions preserved the script; their provenance is unclear, but the first may have been made for radio broadcasts and the second was made in 1998, presumably for the Lübeck production. Not until the 1990s did the original 1932 manuscript surface in the papers of Kurt E. Heyne. This is now in the collection of the Deutsches Kabarettarchiv, as is the manuscript score, which Norbert Schultze donated in the 1980s.
prologue or a musical” (Markt 1999). “The Goethe spoof is a bit dusty,” another admitted, “but nonetheless funny” (Feldhoff 1999). After decades of neglect, Hier irrt Goethe deserves a production on a prominent stage like the Komische Oper in Berlin, which would take it on with the courage to play its absurdity, camp, and queerness for all it is worth.

Several German journalists have recently diagnosed the death of irony, arguing that in the age of ISIS and terrorist attacks, the rise of Trump and right-wing populism in Europe, the refugee crisis, the Greek financial collapse, and the Brexit vote, double-edged humor is outmoded and counterproductive. In a valiant defense, Matthias Kalle proposed that as self-critical reflection, irony battles dogmatism and fights for open-mindedness and creativity. “We need irony, because if we have that, then we have more freedom, more solidarity, more morality and more humanity” (Kalle 2016).32 As a Weimar reviewer noted in 1932, the value of entertainers like Die vier Nachrichter lay in their clever jesting as Sorgenbrecher, stress-relievers in the very face of the crisis, hatefulness, and dogmatism that characterized the day—countering those overshadowing “lousy times” conjured up in Hier irrt Goethe’s prologue (Dbr. 1932). Arguably, in such sovereign irony lie the dignity and humanity we so badly need as the world appears to be collapsing around us.

32. Kalle wrote in response to an article in the same newspaper, Die Zeit (Steeg 2016); other recent critics of irony are Rosenfelder (2016), Lüdecke (2016), Seiler (2016), and Jazz & Politik (2016).
Hier irrt Goethe

List of Musical Numbers

As indicated in the copyist’s manuscript score dated 27 March 1932 (Deutsches Kabarettarchiv, donated by Norbert Schultze): “Text und Musik: Die 4 Nachrichter,” with handwritten notes, cues, and annotations. 27 + 1 pp., but missing 2 pages

No. 1: Ouvertüre (pages 2 and 3 of three are missing)

[I. Akt]
No. 2: Operettenchor
No. 3: Weibermarsch

II. Akt
No. 4: Terzett
No. 4a: Rezitativ [written in a different hand, possibly modern]
No. 5: Rezitativ und Arie
No. 6: Weimarwalzer
No. 7a: I. Begrüssungschor
No. 7b: II. Begrüssungschor
No. 8: Chor und Ensemble (gleich wie No. 4)
No. 9: Tulpenwaltz [crossed out and renumbered 7]
No. 10: Schwipsduett (gleich wie No. 2)
No. 11: Rumba “Charlotte”
No. 12: Boston [instrumental, only 8 bars]

[III. Akt]
No. 13: Ufamännchens Wachtparade: Ein Charakterstück
No. 14: Weibermarsch (wie 3) [crossed out]
No. 15: Finale

References


Grosch, Nils, and Carolin Stahrenberg, eds. 2016. *“Im weißen Rößl”: Kulturgeschichtliche Perspektiven.* Münster: Waxmann.


Weimar Era Operettas


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