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Switzerland in the Second World War

The theatre: collaboration and resistance

The frontiers between Switzerland and Nazi Germany were porous in the artistic field too. This is shown by the initial results of a National Fund research project at the University of Basle.

In the 1930s and during the Second World War, Switzerland's theatre landscape was very varied. Playing alongside the professional city houses, there were a large number of popular theatre troupes and amateur acting groups. Plays which were just entertainment attracted the biggest audiences. Between 1935 and 1950, the two Swiss dramatic productions most often performed in the country's city theatres were the soldier play 'Gilberte de Courgenay' by Bolo Mäglin and the staged version of John Knittel's novel, 'Via Mala'.

Historical dramas were also relatively successful. But the few so-called contemporary plays were either badly received by the public or not staged for many years out of fear of a similar fate. Although they remained true to the

classical repertoire, most theatre-goers were looking for relief from everyday worries.

A demand for genuine Swiss theatre

Since it was set up, the Swiss-German city theatre was almost without exception run by foreigners. Swiss actors were rare, and so were Swiss plays good enough to be staged. From 1930, there were increasing calls for more Swiss actors, directors and playwrights to be taken into account. At a time when the country was threatened by foreign ideologies, the theatre too should be mobilised on behalf of the nation. This also had a material aspect – people were afraid of competition from the Third Reich in this field also.

In addition, dialect drama – which had always had a lowly position in the past – was gaining ever broader acceptance. At the Zurich National Exhibition in 1939 dozens of dialect plays were performed on amateur stages.

Resistance from Nazi sympathisers

Because of Switzerland's official attitude of neutrality, contacts were maintained with Nazi Germany in culture just as much as in the economic field. This led to considerable tension in theatrical life. Emigrés who had fled to Switzerland tried to emphasise on the stage values such as democracy, freedom and tolerance – provided they obtained work permits, that is. They were sharply criticised and often disparaged by Nazi sympathisers and spies of the German embassy.

Actual Nazi plays were not staged in Switzerland, although many Swiss theatre people continued to work in the Third Reich. In 1933, the first Swiss actors returned from Germany, but many Swiss artists were happy to obtain income from across the border. Just like some Swiss academics and authors, a number of playwrights did not seem to realise that the culture of

the National Socialists required total allegiance.

On the German stage

The Swiss author, Jakob Schaffner, a member of the Reich Chamber of Literature, sympathised quite openly with National Socialism. His plays were performed in the Third Reich until 1943. Rudolf Joho continued working as a theatre director in Brunswick until 1944. In January 1942, Knittel's 'Via Mala' played to a capacity audience in Munich for the 50th time, and up till 1943 Swiss composers Othmar Schoeck and Heinrich Sutermeister allowed première performances of their latest works to take place in Nazi Germany. Many Swiss actors and actresses returned to their homeland only after all German theatres were closed in September 1944.

Ursula Käser-Leisibach, Hans Stutz and Martin Stern



Swiss composers such as Othmar Schoeck and Heinrich Sutermeister – shown here at his piano – allowed their operas to be premiered in Nazi Germany until 1943. (Photo: zvg)

The first large-scale theatre study

The Basle Research Group, made up of German literature specialists Professor Martin Stern and Hans Amstutz together with historian Ursula Käser-Leisibach, has examined about 350 texts of plays in the first ever large-scale study of German-language Swiss drama during the period 1930–1950. It has also studied annual theatre programmes and has prepared an overview of theatre festivals, theatrical competitions and the work of amateur acting troupes. In addition, the experts have looked at the way events in the theatre were received amongst the public by collecting critics' reviews and evaluating much other archive material. The project was supported by the Swiss National Fund for the Promotion of Scientific Research. A publication, complete with registers and statistics, is planned for 1998.