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100 Years of Friedrich Dürrenmatt



Damian Elsig, Director
(Photo: Robert Hofer)

In 2021, the Swiss National Library celebrated the centenary of the birth of writer and painter Friedrich Dürrenmatt, used the continued challenge of coronavirus restrictions as an opportunity to develop new digital cultural offerings, and got a new director. Damian Elsig took over the helm from Marie-Christine Doffey, and with his team plans to turn the memory institution into a library of the future.

International network strengthened with Dürrenmatt centenary

2021 was a special year for the Swiss National Library as 5 January 2021 marked 100 years since the birth of Friedrich Dürrenmatt – reason enough for a special Dürrenmatt programme. Following extensive renovation work in 2020, the Centre Dürrenmatt Neuchâtel reopened its doors in March 2021 with the new permanent exhibition *Friedrich Dürrenmatt – writer and painter* on his life and his illustrative and literary work. It also presented two special exhibitions in 2021: *Friedrich Dürrenmatt and Switzerland – fictions and metaphors* and *Friedrich Dürrenmatt and the world*. The first looked at how he viewed, wrote about and presented Switzerland in his works and talks, while the second traced the writer and painter's travels across the globe.

The Swiss National Sound Archives used the centenary as an opportunity to release a phonography on Friedrich Dürrenmatt with over 200 recordings of readings, lectures and interviews.

The Swiss Literary Archives (SLA), which manages and preserves Dürrenmatt's literary estate, published the *Stoffe-Projekt* in association with the Diogenes Verlag in the spring of 2021. The attractive edition, lavishly illustrated with facsimiles, explores Dürrenmatt's autobiographical work. A freely accessible online presentation of the 30,000 digitised manuscripts from Dürrenmatt's 20-year writing process accompanied the five-volume book edition. An array of previously unpublished texts was therefore accessible to the public for the first time, allowing a fresh and comprehensive look at his work. To coincide with this publication, in the summer the NL presented *Stoffe. Eine Projektion zu Friedrich Dürrenmatts Spätwerk* in Bern, which allowed visitors to immerse themselves in the extensive material. The SLA also organised the international conference *Wirklichkeit als Fiktion – Fiktion als Wirklichkeit* at the end of the year, with a diverse cultural fringe programme.

The Dürrenmatt centenary was utilised by all institutions belonging to the NL as a chance to build local, national and international links and to share their holdings and knowledge with interested parties in Switzerland and abroad.

Coronavirus pandemic utilised to develop digital offerings

Once again, 2021 was a year shaped by the coronavirus pandemic, resulting in closures, cancellations, postponements and events being moved online. Despite these challenges, the library's services and the cultural offerings on site and in digital form remained accessible and usable and were in high demand. The NL used the opportunity to push ahead with the digital transformation, including of cultural offerings. For example, 2021 saw the launch of the *Library Live Talks* on Instagram which explore the exhibition themes, and the podcast *Gegensprecher* featuring interviews with experts on the NL's exhibitions. Events over several days, such as the academic conference on Friedrich Dürrenmatt with streaming and an on-site programme, were also organised successfully. The digital formats developed during the pandemic complement the existing on-site cultural offerings and allow interested audiences from beyond the Bern area to take part remotely.

Change of director: Marie-Christine Doffey hands over to Damian Elsig

Marie-Christine Doffey headed up the NL for over fifteen years – from 2005 to 2021. This was a period that was shaped by one overriding trend: the ongoing and ever more rapid digitalisation of society and libraries. This period saw an increasing tendency for the analogue and the digital to merge, and this trend continues to play a key role in the NL's strategic direction.

Thanks to Marie-Christine Doffey and NL staff, the NL was able to maintain its position as Switzerland's most important memory institution in this dynamic environment. Through the integration of the Swiss National Sound Archives, Ms Doffey also played a part in the preservation of Switzerland's cultural sound heritage. Additionally, she was heavily involved in the international community of national libraries.

Following a transition phase, during which deputy director Elena Balzardi was acting director, Damian Elsig took over the management of the NL in August 2021. He previously headed up the Valais Media Library from 2009 to 2021 and will now continue the development of the NL to become the library of the future. Crucial to this will be aligning the analogue and digital services at the three sites in Bern, Lugano and Neuchâtel with the future needs of the Swiss population. The focus is on people. The NL aims to provide the people of Switzerland with easy and modern access to the country's cultural heritage. Together with other cultural and educational institutions, it will be a place of engagement, encounter and dialogue. Welcome to the NL – the library of Switzerland.

Damian Elsig
Director