American and German Theater
By FREDERIC MELLINGER

Theatrical art is being used today as a successful medium in cementing cultural appreciation between Germany and the United States—but the fact remains that it's a long way from Broadway to Kurfuerstendamm.

American theater, on the one hand, has felt the influence of the English, French and German stage and has evolved from these varied patterns into a highly commercial branch of the great entertainment industry known to the trade as "show business."

German theater, on the other, is steeped in centuries of historic tradition and has often sacrificed popular appeal for cultural interests, resulting in a lack of the boldness, daring and innovation characterizing the American stage.

With these different backgrounds, it is natural that German and American theater should vary throughout their entire structure—in business, production methods, staging and schools of acting.

Theatrical life in America has held to a tightly centralized form, although this centralization has been somewhat loosened since 1915 with the inception of the Little Theater, university and community theaters. Nonetheless professional American theater today still is represented by the theater on Broadway.

In contrast, German theater has always been completely decentralized. Every petty principality vied with its neighbors in its court theater. Cities and smaller towns aimed at the construction of modernly equipped theaters on the most beautiful site in town while all larger German cities boasted first-class privately run theaters usually supported by the rich and therefore independent of popular taste. These theaters, frequently generously subsidized by the ruling classes, often held a tight check rein over productions while the state theaters, with their sprawling administrative apparatus, administered didactic control over the choice of plays.

This solicitude for the German theater displayed by princes, state and city governments, and the rich has been far from a blessing to German drama. These backers of the theater, along with controlling the purse strings, have often brought stringent control to the actual productions. The censorship and muzzling of artistic thought resulted eventually in the organization of the people's theater (Volksbuehne), without which plays like Gerhart Hauptmann's "The Weavers" and "Before the Dawn" would never have been produced in Berlin.

The highly commercialized aspect of American theater has freed it from the restrictive bonds of censorship and has allowed a free use of money to lay out on better artists, more expensive productions, scenery, design, costuming and better salaries for the behind-scene technicians. Plays can spend longer time in rehearsal striving for perfection and managers can experiment with impunity.

Without centuries of tradition to follow, the American theater also is less shackled throughout its entire structure and is more independent of administrative bonds. The long list of regular employees in a German city or state theater again spells the difference between the two stages.

The Broadway story of a drama-manuscript on its way from the author's desk to its appearance before the footlights is the story of the difference between the German and American stage.

The American playwright, unlike his German counterpart, does not bring his play to a theater at all. A theater on Broadway is but an empty house to be rented by a producer or theatrical company. The Shubert Theater in New York, for instance, which may be leased for any type of production, in no way resembles the prewar Reinhardt, Jessner or Brahms theatres of Berlin where these respective producers-directors retained their own theaters, each noted for a definite style.

Instead the American playwright seeks a producer in one of the many office buildings studding the theatrical district. In place of the impressive office of the German intendant decked in plush carpeting and massive furniture, the informal American producer is usually found surrounded by a couple of file cabinets and the inevitable glamorous secretary strategically placed to ward off young hopefuls.

The same informality is the keynote of the producer's whole approach to his selection of the various manuscripts which crowd his desk. Plays are never read in the office, but at the producer's comfort—at home, in bed, or on the beach. If the play rings a bell with the producer, the signing of the contract is equally informal. A cocktail lounge is the traditional setting for the business in hand, and the timing, as every young playwright knows, is after the third martini. Once the contract has

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been signed with the writer, the producer’s next worry is that of funds to finance the enterprise. If he has a good name in the show world, he will not find it difficult to raise the money. There are always “angels” around Broadway who know the theater investment may mean good business. Sometimes dozens of small enthusiasts have financed a production by buying shares of $100 each or less.

With the necessary capital secured, the producer begins his search for a theater and only when he has signed a contract with the theater, a director, and two or three leading actors does he move out of his sparsely furnished office and into the empty theater building to select the rest of his cast and begin rehearsals — and German directors may learn with some skepticism that there is no gala premiere in Germany more thoroughly rehearsed than any normal Broadway production.

While the history of German theater heads its chapters with the names of the country’s creative geniuses — Goethe, Iffland, Laube, Reinhardt — periods of American theater are closely associated with the names of great producers who helped to build the industry into a vast commercial enterprise as did Charles Frohman, who, in 1898, founded a theater syndicate which eventually controlled more than 500 theaters throughout the United States.

German theatrical circles are prone to sneer at the commercial aspect of the American stage, content to believe that under such a system only cheap and trivial plays could stand a chance. However this is fallacious reasoning engendered in many cases by diehard German class consciousness.

**GERMAN PRODUCERS** invariably underrate their audiences. The American producer cannot afford to. Time and again Broadway has proved that clever experimental productions and plays of high literary value are welcomed by “the masses” on their true merits.

The American producer does not usually dare to bring his play before New York audiences (including the critics who don’t pull their punches) before trying it out before the sophisticated theatergoers of Boston, Chicago or Detroit. A Broadway hit will often run continuously for years before touring the country, bringing in fat royalties to the author, large dividends to the backers, and greater salaries to the actors.

As the production techniques between German and American theater differ, so do the styles of acting. Americans visiting the German theater are amazed by the bombastic style which often, for them, detracts from the play itself. Conversely, Germans who visit a Broadway theater think that American acting lacks zest until they become accustomed to the restraint and subtlety of American acting.

The continuous excitement on the German stage is due to the German conception of “temperament.” In Germany an actor “has” or “has not” this decisive criterion of theatrical talent. And just as Americans, not used to the emotional intensity of the German stage, think German productions “too loud,” “too excited,” Germans feel that the American actor, minus shouting and gesticulation, lacks temperament.

Then, too, one cannot separate pathos from German acting. The theater is for the German people primarily a safety vent for pent-up emotions, and pathos, that typically German emotional element, has been retained in Germany with all changing theatrical styles from the Meininger school to the Juergen Fehling.

This divergence in acting schools carries over to directing and the German theatrical director is miles apart from his American colleague. The average German director fills the house with the drone of his voice as he knows that his cast is judging his “temperament” by his volume.

**IN SHARP CONTRAST** to the German style is the calm, and again informal, manner of the American director. In Maxwell Anderson’s play “Joan of Lorraine,” for instance, the director, one of the play’s characters, addresses his cast as follows:

“You probably know my theory about rehearsals. Anyway, you’ve had some experience with it. My notion is that the more you kid the play and the actors and everybody concerned, the better it is for all of us. If there’s anything or anybody that won’t stand kidding, now’s the time to find it out. So I razz everyone in sight, including myself . . .

“We’re getting the feeling of this thing. But that’s all preparation. What we’re all waiting for and working toward is the miracle — the miracle that has to happen with every play that’s going to go. Some day we’ll start cold as usual, just reading lines, and then that holy fire will begin to play around one actor — and then another — and then around a whole scene — and then the spirit will descend on all of us at once and we’ll make a new world about the size of a star and set it down on a bare stage, surrounded by kitchen chairs and mockery and bungling mechanics and directors. And afterward maybe we’ll never hit anything as good as that again, but we’ll get an echo of it, as much as we can recall and we’ll put that echo into costumes and sets and polish it up, and that’s what the first night audience will be in on.

“Now don’t let this scare you. Don’t try for any miracle. Just go ahead and read your lines and relax, but if a miracle happens don’t let that scare you either. Take it, Al. We can start now.”

The director’s voice is as casual as his speech and he would never reach a German cast accustomed to flowery phrases and pathetic images conjuring up the miracle of creative art. He speaks as a “regular guy” to his fellow workers in the only language which would hold an American audience on the stage as well as anywhere else in America.

**Wiesbaden Library in New Home**

The Wiesbaden US Information Center, containing one of Hesse’s largest American libraries for German use, more than doubled its present facilities in a move to new quarters in April. It is now located on Blumenstrasse.

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