

# A powerful theatrical presentation of an outstanding piece of literature

## Alfred Döblin's Berlin Alexanderplatz, performed at the Maxim Gorki Theatre in Berlin

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*“The human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations.”* Karl Marx, Sixth Thesis on Feuerbach.

Franz Biberkopf had made a terrible mistake. He had fallen into bad company and in a fit of rage killed his former girlfriend. As a result he spent four years in jail. Now he is free and a single idea revolves in his head ... “he will be a decent citizen”. His demands are not excessive. He seeks a woman he can love and proper work. He is physically able and not afraid of hard work. He is not a well-educated man but he is no fool. He knows it will not be easy. Just released from prison his first words as he emerges from the darkness of the subway into the light, tumult and confusion of Berlin's main transport junction, Alexanderplatz: “Free ... now the punishment begins!”

The year is 1927, just nine years since the end of the First World War and the bloody suppression of the November Revolution, three years since the hyperinflation of 1923-24 which forced millions in Germany to once again attempt to make a fresh start. In 1927 Charles Lindbergh completed his record breaking single-handed flight across the Atlantic in his plane “Spirit of St. Louis.” Following years of poverty and mass unemployment, tuberculosis and related diseases were on the growth in Berlin.

Alfred Döblin writes in *Berlin Alexanderplatz*:

“In Berlin in 1927 48,742 persons died, not including the stillborn. 4570 from tuberculosis, 6443 from cancer, 5656 from heart complaints, 4818 from vascular disease, 5140 from brain haemorrhages, 2419 from lung disease, 961 from whooping cough, 562 children died from diphtheria, 123 from scarlet fever, 93 from measles, 3640 babies under the age of one year. 42,696 people were born.”

In 1920s Berlin the scathing anti-war expressionist art of Otto Dix and George Grosz and the plays of the young Bertolt Brecht were shocking established bourgeois artistic circles. The physicist Albert Einstein was in charge of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute leading the battle against prominent figures in German scientific circles who dismissed his work as “Jewish physics”, proclaiming the necessity of putting in its place proper “German” or “Aryan” science.

Franz Biberkopf doesn't concern himself with art or physics. He is too busy looking for work.

Alexanderplatz, situated at the heart of Berlin, resembles a smoky, sweaty human anthill. Trains, subways and buses disgorge their passengers at minute intervals, and if you wait long enough at Alexanderplatz you will inevitably run into old friends, enemies and acquaintances. At Alexanderplatz Biberkopf meets and rapidly resolves the temporary problem of his impotence, with the sister of the woman he

killed. Later on he tries working at the station selling ties and laces ... start small and work your way up ... “If you can't make it in Berlin, you can't make it anywhere”. But times are hard and money is short ... it is hard going.

Despite the defeat of the November Revolution there is growing enthusiasm for the Russian Revolution and the Communist Party is growing rapidly. Increasingly violent confrontations take place between the fascists and powerfully organised groups of workers and communists in Berlin. Biberkopf is not really political, but in those times it was impossible not to take sides. Biberkopf seeks order and stability, but more importantly he is also seeking work. He is offered a job selling the Nazi paper *Völkischer Beobachter*. He has a run-in with a group of communists in a pub, some of them former friends. In the conflict which ensues he cannot really think of any good reason for sticking his neck out for the Nazis. He tosses aside his swastika arm band.

In the course of the conflict in the pub Biberkopf is asked his philosophy of life. He scratches his head, he is no philosopher. Then he remembers a sort of poem which was passed along inside prison. He recites it from memory with the appropriate dose of acerbic Berliner *Schnautze* humour. It goes something like this:

“If on this earth you want to be, a creature, male and full of glee, be careful and weigh everything, before you let the midwife fling you towards the daylight, there to grow: Earth is a nest of grief and woe. Believe the poet of these verses, who often pines and often curses, while chewing on this iron crust—quotation pinched from Goethe's Faust: Man only relishes life's glow, in general, as an embryo! ... There is the good old father State, he rags and irks you soon and late. He pricks and pesters you—you're bled—with laws and codes: ‘Prohibited!’ His first commandment: Man, shell out. His second: Hold your dirty snout. And thus you live in adumbration, your state is that of obfuscation. And if you seek to drown your queer, rough anger at some pub with beer, or with some wine, respectively, a headache promptly trails the spree. Meanwhile the years knock at the gate, the moths erode the hair, elate. Suspiciously the rafters creak, the limbs grow flabby, blighted, weak: gray matter sours in the brain, and thinner grows the good old strain. In short, you see fall coming nigh, you put the spoon down and you die. And now I ask you, friend, a-quiver: just what is man, what is life's river? Did not our great poet Schiller confess: ‘It's not the highest men possess.’ But I say: it's a chicken-ladder at best, up and down and all the rest.”

Still without work Biberkopf once again lands in bad company. He is altogether too trusting of the wrong sort and becomes fatally attached to the psychopathic Reinhold. Against his will Biberkopf is roped into a crime which ends tragically for him. He loses his arm and what's far

worse, later on, loses his lovely Sonja from Bernau, whom he nicknamed Mieze... his tiny pussy cat. This last blow is too much. He lands delirious in hospital only to re-emerge as a broken and changed man.

Alfred Döblin wrote *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, which was published in 1929 and, to the surprise of its author and publisher, quickly became a best seller. A film version followed in 1931 featuring Germany's leading character actor Heinrich George as Biberkopf. Not everybody liked the book. Amongst its most vitriolic critics were the organs of the Communist Party ("counterrevolutionary"— *Rote Fahne* 1929; "reactionary, counterrevolutionary ... and a political danger for the proletariat"— *Linkskurve* 1929), which was in the process of enthroning Ernst Thälmann as its model of a proletarian hero and had no time for the foibles of the likes of Franz Biberkopf.

When Döblin wrote about everyday life in Berlin, he knew what he was talking about. Following a difficult childhood, he trained to be a doctor. Later in life he said that his viewpoint was largely determined by his experiences of poverty as a child. "I belong to the people...to the nation of the poor." He worked as a medical orderly during the First World War and came face to face with the mutilation and destruction wrought by the battlefield. As a doctor Döblin was intensely interested in psychology, making in particular an intensive study of the newly emerging work of Sigmund Freud.

Before and after the war he had his own medical practice in the middle of Berlin. Part of his duties involved working with criminals and he was able to observe that criminality had deep roots inside society itself. He wrote in the *Lesezirkel* of 1932:

"For years I had an observation station for criminals. There I encountered some interesting and remarkable things. And in the course of meeting such people (criminals) and many other similar types on the outside, I acquired a singular picture of our own society; that there is no sharply delineated border between criminals and non-criminals, at all possible levels in society—or better, everything that I saw was ... infiltrated by criminality. That was already a singular perspective."

As a young man at the turn of the century Döblin had begun to write and take interest in the newly emerging artistic movements ... first Futurism, then Dadaism and Expressionism. He made clear his antipathy for the outlook of German classical writers such as Thomas Mann. He joined Brecht and others in 1925 to form the "Group 25" which discussed and theorised on art and politics. Before writing *Berlin Alexanderplatz* Döblin had written a number of outstanding novels which had sold in very small quantities.

Döblin and *Berlin Alexanderplatz* have been a source of inspiration to some of the most prolific and gifted of German artists this century. Many members of a contemporary German audience will view this latest dramatisation of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* through the "spectacles" of German dramatist and film maker Rainer Werner Fassbinder. According to the production notes of the Gorki production, Fassbinder first picked up *Berlin Alexanderplatz* at the age of 14 and gave up before finishing the first two hundred pages, finding the whole thing desperately boring. Five years later Fassbinder took up the book again and was captivated, resolving at some point to make his own production of the piece. It took Fassbinder 10 years, but finally in 1980, and at the height of his powers he released his own monumental 13-part television version of the piece. Fifty years after its publication Döblin's book once again found a mass audience and its character's Franz, Mieze and Reinhold remain ingrained in the minds of many through the wonderful performances of Gunther Lamprecht, Barbara Sukowa and Gottfried John under Fassbinder's direction.

All that remains to be said is that this latest four-hour theatre dramatisation by director Uwe Eric Laufenberg and Oliver Rees, author of the stage production, is a worthy successor to Fassbinder's interpretation. Ben Becker, who many will remember as the bass singer in the film

*Comedian Harmonists*, gives an extraordinary performance as Biberkopf. A younger and more vigorous Biberkopf than that of George and Lamprecht, Becker imparts an extraordinary range of emotion, from brooding resignation and blunt humour to animal rage and despair in depicting the trials and tribulations of Biberkopf.

All of the other players are excellent, in particular Regine Zimmermann as the delightful, spontaneous but resilient Mieze, and Frank Seppler as the careening, unpredictable Reinhold. A few small things jar—some of the music used towards the end of the piece seems inappropriate—but such details are of little significance. Laufenberg has made a bold and largely successful effort to capture the passion, humour and multifariousness of Döblin's masterwork and that is above all reflected in the performance of Becker.

At the same time to see *Berlin Alexanderplatz* performed today recalls that we ourselves are still living in Döblin's century. Like Biberkopf, we also live in a society where huge, anonymous forces are working to crush everything honest, straightforward and admirable in human beings, to systematically extinguish every vestige of genuine individuality.

One year before the beginning of a new century a renewed acquaintance with *Berlin Alexanderplatz* and the work of Döblin is, in many respects, the perfect antidote. Just the thing to ease the pain, calm the nerves, collect the thoughts and ... become rightly angry about the way things are.

The last word is left to Alfred Döblin and *Berliner Alexanderplatz*.. Franz has just been ejected from a car. When he wakes up he will be minus an arm:

"Let us celebrate the rising of the sun with its wonderful light".... up to.... "You are not big, you are not small, you are a joy."

"Let us be happy when the sun rises and its beautiful light is here. Gas light may go out, electric light, too. People get up when the alarm clock rattles, a new day has begun. If it was April 8th yesterday, it is the 9th today, if it was Sunday, it is now Monday. The year has not changed, nor the month, but a change has occurred nevertheless. The world has rolled ahead. The sun has risen. It is not certain what this sun is. Astronomers concern themselves a great deal with this body. According to them, it is the central body of our planetary system; for our earth is only a small planet, and what, indeed, are we? When the sun rises like that and we are glad, we should really be sad, for what are we, anyway; the sun is 300,000 times greater than the earth; and what a host of numbers and zeros there still are, and all they have to say is this: We are but a zero, nothing at all, just nothing. Simply ridiculous, isn't it, to be happy over that.

"And yet, we are glad when the beautiful light is here, white and strong, and when it comes into the streets; and in the rooms all the colours awaken, and faces are there, human features. It is agreeable to touch shapes with one's hands, but it is a joy to see, to see, to see, to see colours and lines. And we are glad, now we can show what we are, we act, we live. We are also glad in April for that bit of warmth, how glad the flowers are that they can grow! Surely that must be an error, a mistake, those terrible numbers with all the zeros!

"Just rise, sun, you don't frighten us. We don't care about your many miles, your diameter, your volume. Warm sun, just rise, bright light, arise. You are not big, you are not small, you are just happiness."



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