

The rehabilitation of Gustav Gründgens

Gustav Gründgens —A German Career: an exhibition at the Berlin Staatsbibliothek

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29 December 1999

December 22 marked the one hundredth anniversary of the birth of the German actor and theatre director Gustav Gründgens, a flamboyant radical in the 1920s and early 1930s, who became one of the Hitler regime's most pliable artistic servants. Following the Nazi takeover in 1933, and under the direct patronage of Prime Minister Hermann Goering, Gründgens became director of Berlin's principal theatre, the Staatstheater, and remained in the job until near the end of the war in 1944. He is emblematic of the intellectual who chooses ego and career, even in the service of monsters, over principle. Gründgens' renegacy and opportunism were fictionally immortalised in Klaus Mann's novel *Mephisto*.

As part of the anniversary a number of cinemas in Berlin are currently showing films featuring Gründgens, a new television documentary has been produced and Gründgens is also the subject of an exhibition currently in Berlin, which is set to tour a number of other German cities.

The exhibition looks at the work and career of Gründgens under the title "A German Career". It brings together posters, correspondence, theatrical miscellany and photographs. Some of the most notorious photos of Gründgens taken during the war are on display. In one photo we see a smiling Gründgens vigorously shaking the hand of Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels. Another photo shows Gründgens squatting in German Reichswehr army fatigues while brandishing a rifle above his head. The date is 1943. Gründgens had temporarily relinquished his post as theatre director to join the army following reverses on the Eastern Front and Goebbels' subsequent appeal for "Total War". Also on display in the exhibition is the German Service cross with star, the highest award which can be made to a civilian and which was awarded to Gründgens in 1954 for his services to post-war German theatre.

At the entrance to the exhibition a poster hangs with a quote from Gründgens himself in the period following the Second World War. In large letters it reads: "I want to be regarded as someone who preserved and nourished the flame in a dark period and someone who can relate how it was, how it is now and how one could possibly rebuild." Many biographical comments on Gründgens on his hundredth anniversary make the same point. His collaboration with the Nazis is justified on the basis that through his activities, Gründgens rescued and maintained a certain artistic tradition.

The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* refers to Gründgens as "a participator who did not participate" [i.e., in the crimes of the fascists]. The *Berliner Zeitung* writes: "Gründgens did not abuse the theatre, did not put himself at the service of ideological terror." Apologists for Gründgens also claim that during his period as leader of the Staatstheater he was able to rescue a number of Jewish and left-wing opponents of National Socialism. The aim of this article is to examine and question such assertions.

Who was Gründgens?

Gründgens was born in 1899, the son of a prosperous businessman

whose financial interests were already unravelling at the time of the birth of his first son, in an economic crisis that peaked towards the end of the last century. Injured in the First World War (due to the negligence of an army comrade) Gründgens began performing for an Army theatre troupe. Already as a young man Gründgens was determined to make a name for himself. At 18 he sent a postcard to a friend advising the latter to hold on to the item because one day he, Gründgens, would be famous and the card would be valuable.

Following army demobilisation Gründgens attended acting school and began seeking work on the stage. In fact, the German theatre was flourishing in the turbulent Weimar years, competition was intense and Gründgens had to work hard to establish himself. In 1923 he moved to the Kammerspiele Theatre in Hamburg and between 1923 and 1928 played over 70 roles.

Not everybody at this time was impressed by Gründgens' acting ability. One of the most perceptive of the German critics, Herbert Ihering, described Gründgens' appearance in a revue as "crude and simplistic". Somewhat against his own wishes, Gründgens was continually cast as and made a name for himself playing villains. He is said to have excelled as the sadist Ottfried in Ferdinand Bruckner's *The Criminal* and for a while Gründgens was condemned to playing sharks, arrogant snobs, social climbers, as well as morally unstable and neurotic types.

Already by the middle of the twenties Gründgens was moving in celebrated artistic and literary circles. In 1926 he married Erika Mann, the actress and daughter of author Thomas Mann, and also enjoyed a close friendship with Erika's brother Klaus.

Biographies describe Gründgens in the twenties as leaning to the left politically. A press release in 1926 declared that Gründgens was planning a series of sketches at the Hamburg theatre under the title "Revolutionary Theatre". The pieces were never in fact performed. In *Mephisto* Klaus Mann describes how Gründgens (Hendrik Höfgen in the book) was on friendly terms with Communist Party members who worked in the theatre, always ready to exchange a clenched-fist welcome on his way to rehearsals. At the same time Gründgens did not hide his abhorrence for the Nazis.

But he also made no secret of his theatrical ambitions, above all, to establish himself on the Berlin stage. His chance came when Germany's most prominent director Max Reinhardt invited him to come to Berlin and work for his company. Under Reinhardt's direction Gründgens had his first opportunity to play the role with which he was to become closely identified—Mephistopheles in Goethe's *Faust*, premiered in 1932. In his novel, Klaus Mann describes the political tensions of the time through the eyes of two young men, one a fascist, the other a Communist:

"The day is approaching. That blazing conviction drives Hans Miklas and Otto Ulrichs forward, consuming them and millions of other young people. But for what day is Hendrik Höfgen waiting? He never waits for

anything but a new part. His great role in the 1932-33 season is to be Mephisto.”

Gründgens was out of the country when the Nazis came to power in early 1933. We have no way of knowing what went through his head. We do know that he was apprehensive about returning to Germany. He had not, after all, made his feelings about the Nazis a secret and he was wise enough to know that he could also encounter problems as someone, despite his short-lived marriage, known to be a homosexual. In *Mephisto*, Mann, who knew Gründgens very well (some say to the point of a sexual relationship), speculates on Höfgen's deliberations about returning to Germany:

“He belonged to no party. And he wasn't a Jew, and so everything could be forgiven him.... He was a blond Rhinelander.

“I am a blond Rhinelander,” exulted Hendrik Höfgen, revived by champagne and his optimistic reflections on the political scene. It was in the best of spirits that he went to bed.”

Whether this characterisation is accurate or not, we know that Gründgens returned to Germany under Hitler and flourished. Goebbels was openly hostile to him, as he was to all homosexuals (whom he referred to as 175ers according to the appropriate clause of the Weimar Constitution), but Gründgens found a willing patron in Prime Minister Goering, who had married an actress and had his own artistic pretensions. The exodus by talented artists after 1933 left many plum positions free and Gründgens' rise, with Goering's help, was meteoric.

In 1934 he was appointed director of Berlin's most prestigious theatre, the Berlin Staatstheater. The National Socialists realised that such a position required an appropriate salary and in 1936 Gründgens sealed a deal securing an annual average income of Reichsmark 200,000. He made a number of films in this period (he turned down the offer of the lead role in Veit Harlan's *Jud Süß*), earning on average RM80,000 per picture. In comparison a state secretary in Nazi Germany earned on average RM20,000. In 1934 Gründgens had moved into the luxurious villa owned by a Jewish banker who had fled the country. The price paid for the place was negotiated by Gründgens' lawyer, a member of the Nazi SA.

Gründgens was a welcome guest at the parties and festivities of prominent Nazi personalities and, thanks to Goering, he was awarded his one audience with Hitler in 1936. There is evidence to suggest that Gründgens was allowed a certain freedom in terms of his choice of programme, but nevertheless the official line of the party with regard to art and culture was stringent and reactionary, perhaps best summed up by Goebbels: “The German art of the next decade will be heroic, it will be steely-romantic, it will be factual and completely free of sentimentality, it will be national with great Pathos and committed, or it will be nothing.”

Gründgens' efforts to directly support the war effort have been mentioned above. In June 1943 Gründgens underwent army training in Holland and was posted to an air defence station and then an airport near Amsterdam. In April 1944 Goering recalled his cultural figurehead back to Berlin to take over once again the affairs of the ailing Staatstheater. On September 1, 1944 Goebbels issued an order closing all German theatres until the end of the war. All available artistic personnel were assigned to vital war production, for example, in the armaments factories. Gründgens was allowed to sit out the rest of the war in his Berlin home.

Upon the fall of Berlin Gründgens was incarcerated in a Russian prison camp. His rapid rehabilitation and re-entry into German cultural life was secured by a commission in Chemnitz in Soviet occupied Germany that restricted its investigation of Gründgens' wartime role to the issue of whether he had fraudulently acquired his villa in 1934. A decisive element in the commission's decision to rehabilitate Gründgens was the intervention of the Soviet Theatre Officer, Arsenyi Gulyga, who argued powerfully in his favour. A condition for Gründgens' liberation was that he use his theatre talents to promote theatre in the eastern Soviet-occupied sector of Berlin.

In May 1946 Gründgens played his first role since the end of the war as the “Snob” in the play of the same name by playwright Carl Sternheim. In the same year he moved to work in west Berlin and later took up leading roles at theatres in Düsseldorf and Hamburg, establishing himself as the best known actor-director in Germany. In 1960 Gründgens repaid an old debt to Gulyga and Stalinist cultural circles with guest performances in Moscow and Leningrad. Gründgens died in 1963 from an overdose of sleeping tablets while on holiday in Manila.

It is not an easy task today to assess the artistic talents of Gründgens. He starred in many films in the 1930s (and played a role in Fritz Lang's *M*) and 1940s, but commentators maintain that he was never really able to recreate his stage virtuosity on celluloid. He declared that his own favourite role was the humanist prince, Hamlet, but no film version of his Hamlet exists. In *Mephisto* Mann describes how Gründgens as director of the Staatstheater was required to deform Shakespeare's Hamlet into a digestible Teutonic alternative while Shakespeare himself was transformed into *our* “great Germanic writer”. Banned from performance were modern works by playwrights such as Gerhart Hauptmann, Frank Wedekind, August Strindberg, Georg Kaiser and Carl Sternheim.

There is a certain irony, which is perhaps no irony at all, in the fact that Gründgens will always be remembered for his role as Mephistopheles in *Faust*. Gründgens played the role of the devil who tempts and destroys Faust in countless productions and his performance is preserved on film in the classic Hamburg theatre production of 1960. Anyone seeing the 1960 production must concur that Gründgens excels in the part.

There is not the slightest evidence to suggest that Gründgens was a committed Nazi. On the contrary any examination of his life indicates that his ideological attachment to National Socialism was just as precarious as his former association with the German Communist Party. And although Gründgens never missed an opportunity to surround himself with all the trappings of luxury, there were a number of occasions in his life when he was required to pursue his career under difficult living conditions. To reduce Gründgens' career merely to pursuit of riches is inadequate. Most of his contemporaries agree that his most outstanding personal characteristic was his drive for recognition, scathingly summed up in *Mephisto*:

“Hendrik Höfgen—typecast as an elegant blackguard, murderer in evening dress, scheming courtier—see nothing, hear nothing. He has nothing to do with the city of Berlin. Nothing but stages, film studio, dressing rooms, a few night-clubs, a few fashionable drawing rooms are real to him. Does he not feel the change in the seasons? Is he not aware that the years are passing—the last years of that Weimar Republic born amid so much hope and now so piteously expiring—the years 1930, 1931, 1932? The actor Höfgen lives from one first night to the next, from one film to another, his calendar composed of performances days and rehearsal days. He scarcely notices that the snow melts, that the trees and bushes are in bud or in full leaf, that there are flowers and earth and streams. Encapsulated by his ambition as in a prison cell, insatiable and tireless, always in a state of extreme hysterical tension, Hendrik embraces a destiny that seems to him exceptional but is in fact nothing but a vulgar arabesque at the edge of an enterprise doomed to collapse.”

It is worth dwelling here on fate of Mann's book, which must constitute one of the most notorious cultural scandals in the history of post-war Germany. *Mephisto* was first published when Mann was in exile in 1936; at this time he had already broken with Gründgens. Mann declared that through his portrayal of Höfgen/Gründgens he was attempting to depict the capitulation of a whole social layer “My aim was not to tell the story of a definite person, my intention was to present a type and with it the various surrounding milieus ... the social and spiritual requisites which makes possible his rise to prominence in the first place.”

The book presented a devastating portrayal of the Nazi elite and its supporters amongst the intelligentsia and was banned in Germany by the

Nazis as a matter of course. (In his diary entry for May 11, 1933 Klaus Mann noted that all of his previous work had been consigned to the flames in the Nazi book-burning campaign.) The first German edition of *Mephisto* was published by the East German Aufbau Verlag in 1956. In 1964 the Nymphenburg Publishing House in Munich announced its plans to publish the book only to be promptly confronted with a lawsuit initiated by Peter Gründgens-Gorski, the post-war companion of Gründgens.

The judgement against the publishing of the book by the Oberland Court of Hamburg included the following remarkable comment: “The public is not interested in receiving a false picture of the theatre after 1933 from the standpoint of an emigrant.” In other words, Mann's flight from the Nazis disqualified him from commenting on the situation in Germany! Better to stay at home and collaborate! *Mephisto* was only finally published in West Germany in 1980.

There is another factor to account for the ease with which Gründgens could accept the Nazis as his employer. In his brief biography of Gründgens, Thomas Blubacker deals with the former's conception of art and theatre: “Gründgens understood theatre as a holy space which had to be shielded from any influence from outside reality, so that theatrical art could serve the eternal values of beauty and truth” (p. 92). This brings to mind the comment by Leon Trotsky and André Breton in their 1938 manifesto that “so-called ‘pure art’ ... generally serves the extremely impure ends of reaction.”

This is surely the meeting place between Gründgens and many of his supporters today who claim that “pure art” or “pure theatre” is worth any compromise and even justifies treachery on the part of the artist. Of course cultural and artistic activity occupies its own independent sphere, it has its own laws and rhythms of development. It cannot be reduced simply to the immediate requirements of political and social development. But art, and in particular theatre, is a profoundly social activity and the artist ignores general social development at his own peril.

When Gründgens blocked out the social cataclysm taking place all around him, when he closed his eyes to the book-burning, he committed a grievous crime against art and culture in general. He was able to intervene and ensure that a few colleagues and friends, left-leaning or Jewish, were able to continue working. But what was the final balance-sheet?

The persecution of artists in Germany had already commenced before the National Socialists took over power. At the end of 1932 the 162 deputies of the Prussian state parliament passed a bill demanding the sacking of all non-Reichsdeutsche (German) theatre artists and banning performances of pieces with “pacifist or morally destructive tendencies”. Max Reinhardt left Germany on the March 8, 1933. Following the fascist take-over it is estimated that 4,000 theatre artists in all quit Germany, including Oskar Homulka, Peter Lorre, Carola Neher (who was to be murdered by Stalin instead), Max Pallenburg and Conrad Veidt.

This figure of 4,000 does not include an estimated 1,500 writers and dramatists such as Bertolt Brecht, Ernst Toller, Ferdinand Bruckner, Georg Kaiser and Carl Zuckmayer, who all went into exile. Many others failed to escape the clutches of the Nazi SS, were arrested, tortured and died (Carl von Ossietzky, Max Ehrlich, Kurt Gerson, Fritz Grünbaum, Willy Rosen) in concentration camps. Others were driven to suicide (Kurt Tucholsky, Walter Benjamin, Stefan Zweig, Ernst Weiß, Walter Hasenclever and, after the war in 1949, Klaus Mann himself).

Gründgens was not directly responsible for their deaths, but he did play a crucial role in according prestige to the regime which was responsible. He collaborated with and assisted a monstrous, murderous regime to which he lent his artistic and intellectual credibility. He fully deserves his infamy.

A last word: it is impossible to separate the attempts to rehabilitate Gründgens from the deliberate campaign taking place presently in Germany to clear the decks with regard to the heritage of the Nazi dictatorship. Earlier this year German soldiers undertook their first foreign

military intervention since the Second World War—under the guise of preventing a new Holocaust. Recently a concerted campaign in the press and media led to the closure of an exhibition devoted to the crimes of the Wehrmacht (German army). And only in the past week a disgraceful deal has been finalised designed to draw a veil over the collaboration between German industry and the fascists.

It is worth quoting one short, remarkable paragraph justifying the recent agreement on Nazi forced labour from an interview with Stuart E. Eizenstat, one of the principal negotiators of the deal:

“I think we also recognise, as we go into the next century, these kind of claims—I mean, not necessarily Holocaust-related, but sort of mass actions—are going to increase. So what we're doing will have some importance in terms of how other mass actions will be treated” (*interview available on the Internet*).

Imperialism and German imperialism anticipate new atrocities in the coming century. Integral to Hitler's success, made possible by the disastrous political line of the Communist Party, was the compliance and spinelessness demonstrated by broad layers of the German intelligentsia. This fundamental lesson of the twentieth century should be borne in mind when reflecting on the career of Gustav Gründgens.



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