

Posing some of the right questions

Einar Schleef 's *Verratenes Volk* (A People Betrayed) at the Deutschen Theater in Berlin

Stefan Steinberg
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Director Einar Schleef's five and a half hour marathon at the Deutschen Theater is provocative in the most positive sense. It provokes and stimulates thought and reflection on some of the most crucial social experiences of the last century.

In fact, his play spans the period from the early days of bourgeois culture in the seventeenth century to the twentieth century and an outstanding literary work—Alfred Döblin's trilogy of novels, *November 1918: A People Betrayed*, which treats the betrayal and defeat of the 1918-19 revolution in Germany following the end of the First World War.

The play is broken up into four discernible segments and begins with a reading from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. This is followed by a lengthy selection of passages from German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, for whom commemorative events marking 100 years since his death are taking place throughout Germany. Third is a segment drawn from the writings of E.E. Dwinger about the horrors experienced by German soldiers on the battlefields of the First World War. The final half of the play is drawn from Döblin's text, and in particular the third volume, *Karl and Rosa*, dealing with role of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg during the war and in the course of the events of 1918.

The play opens with veteran actress, Inge Keller, dressed in a white flowing robe, seated at the front of an empty, pure white stage. For a quarter of an hour in quiet, measured tones she reads from Milton's classic *Paradise Lost*, describing the delights of paradise and the eventual temptation and expulsion of Adam and Eve from their idyll. She leaves the stage and is replaced by the dark suited figure of Friedrich Nietzsche (finely played by the director Schleef himself).

Schleef's Nietzsche

For the next three quarters of an hour Schleef's Nietzsche addresses the audience, occasionally calm and moderated, more often erupting into demagogic invective drawn from Nietzsche's last drafted and autobiographical text, *Ecce Homo*. One year after completing *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche finally succumbed to madness in 1889. In *Ecce Homo* Nietzsche reviews his own literary works in ego-maniacal

fashion—nothing better has been written, he declares, and then goes on to claim that his writings have attained the highest aim which can be obtained on earth: *cynicism*.

The text is peppered with Nietzschean tirades against Germans in general (following his profound disillusion with Bismarck's policies for the unification of Germany), together with the author's celebration of war and banalities over the badness of German cuisine.

As part of the centenary marking his death another play dedicated to Nietzsche is currently playing at Berlin's Schloss Theater. Selectively culling Nietzsche's work, playwright Alexander Widner has woven a script which presents us with a Nietzsche very different to the Schleef variant—Nietzsche as a veritable renaissance man, a lover of wine and dance, a fierce critic of the decadent Germans, desperate to travel south to his favoured Italy.

In fact Schleef's own spluttering, egomaniacal depiction of Nietzsche, representing a nadir in the degeneration of the German Romantic movement of the nineteenth century, is far more convincing. Schleef's Nietzsche bays like a wolf: "Why I am a destiny.... I am not a man, I am dynamite ... when truth steps into battle with the lie of the millennia we shall have convulsions, an earthquake spasm, a transposition of valley and mountain such as never been dreamed of ... there will be wars such as there have never been on earth. Only after me will there be grand politics on earth ..."

The horrors of war, the seeds of revolution

Nietzsche quits the stage and the third section of the play begins. Drawn from the war notebooks of E.E. Dwinger, *Army behind Barbed Wire*, we get a picture of the horrors of the First World War in the years 1915/16. Up until now the play has been carried by individual players. Now a chorus of 10 young scruffily dressed soldiers take the stage and either individually or as a group recite a catalogue of atrocities. The conversation of the soldiers is a mixture of banalities and obscenities contrasting their own memories and yearning to return home with the filth and destruction of combat. In a final depiction of the brutality of war the chorus rape one of their group. One

soldier reluctant to join in the barbarity is forced by his comrades to take part.

Schleef repeatedly uses the form of the traditional Greek chorus (revived in the twentieth century by Bertolt Brecht) throughout his work—either in the form of the recital of text or in powerfully sung choral arrangements. At times in *Verratenes Volk* up to 60 actors and actresses combine on stage to sing or recite text recalling Brecht's and Hans Eisler's own use of mass choirs for their *Lehrstücke* pieces of the late 1920s and early 1930s.

The last long section of the play revolves around a discussion of the nature of the Russian Revolution and the prospects for a German revolution principally drawn from the third part of Döblin's 1918 trilogy *Karl and Rosa*. The scene opens with Rosa Luxemburg (wonderfully played by actress Jutta Hoffmann) in prison for anti-war agitation. In this and a number of other scenes Döblin's literary recreation of Luxemburg is brought vividly to life. While in jail (first in 1915, then released, re-arrested and put into “protective custody” a year later) Luxemburg lost a number of her closest friends and confidantes—victims of the blood bath at the German front.

Condemned to virtual political impotence Luxemburg nevertheless strikes up a sympathetic relationship with her jailer—a young woman. Luxemburg is keenly interested and moved by every living thing around her. At the same time she makes clear that without social revolution her life has no sense.

In a later scene Luxemburg verbally acknowledges the courage and determination displayed by Lenin and the Bolsheviks in pursuit of the Russian Revolution. In the next breath she launches into a withering criticism of some of the measures undertaken by the new Russian government to restrict democratic activity, warning of the dangers that can arise when the party stifles the possibilities of discussion and debate. Interspersed with Luxemburg's ruminations on the revolution, a chorus of young men and women take the front of the stage and recount the course of the workers' and soldiers' uprising in Berlin in the autumn and winter of 1918-19.

In a further scene, set in early January 1919, Luxemburg is in agitated conversation with Liebkecht. Luxemburg is convinced that the newly formed Communist Party has missed a vital opportunity to inaugurate a revolution in Germany. She angrily berates Liebkecht for the loss of workers' lives in a planned assault on a police station. Liebkecht rebuffs her accusation. Responsibility for the workers' lives obviously lies with the SPD government and its employment of Freikorps mercenary troops. Despite the heat of their dispute the two quickly reconcile.

They share the same fate and know from newspapers and leaflets that the SPD is encouraging a pogrom against the Spartacists and in particular its two outstanding leaders. As they await their fate, we are aware that the play is approaching its finale—then something remarkable takes place.

The stage fills with the young cast, gay music starts up and the entire company sport across the stage dancing a jig. Director Schleef is prominent in the dancing group whipping his young cast into music and dance. In contrast to a detectable trend in much contemporary German drama the piece ends without a *Götterdämerrung* [twilight of the gods], there is no *Weltuntergang* [end of the world], no blood splattered against the walls, but rather a jig hinting at the durability of the human spirit. The players leave the stage. Two remain fallen on the floor—Luxemburg and Liebkecht. The remaining cast stroll to the sides and back of the theatre and place their hands defencelessly against the back walls of the stage—a people beaten and betrayed.

It is possible to carp at elements of the play. There is much naked flesh (male) on show in the play—presumably representing the figure of Adam. In the scene of the gang rape conducted during the scene devoted to the horrors of the First World War Schleef seems to imply a relationship (which he does not explain or elaborate upon) between sexual drives and the violent excesses of war.

There are no easily identifiable transitions between the incompatible elements (i.e., Nietzsche—Luxemburg) Schleef introduces in his play, and such eclecticism can often be a cover for the director's own confusion (he was mainly responsible for the finished script of *A People Betrayed*.)

Nevertheless, what lingers in the memory is the play's dynamic use of chorus and song, the topicality of its treatment of war and suffering as well as the passionate, clearly reasoned arguments of Rosa Luxemburg about the course of the Russian Revolution—arguments which still retain their significance today. As in the case of the piece based on his *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (still successfully running at the Maxim Gorki theatre in Berlin), Alfred Döblin, writing in the first half of the twentieth century, is proving one of the most fecund sources of drama for the German stage as it enters a new century.



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