

Actor Bruno Ganz, prominent on stage and screen for more than 40 years: an obituary

Sybille Fuchs
9 March 2019

On February 16, Swiss-born actor Bruno Ganz died of cancer at his home on Lake Zurich at the age of 77. Ganz was one of the leading figures in the contemporary German-speaking theatre and film world. The news of his death was met with grief and came as a shock to all those who worked with a beloved and esteemed colleague over his long career.

It is comforting that the words of German dramatist Friedrich Schiller from his prelude to *Wallenstein*, “When the artist dies, his spell dies with him,” have somewhat lost their sting. Bruno Ganz’ work lives on in the shape of his many films.

Obituaries in the German media have tended to concentrate on two of his film roles—as an angel in Wim Wenders’ *Wings of Desire* (1987) and as a demonic Adolf Hitler in Oliver Hirschbiegel’s *The Downfall* (2004). This, however, only does Ganz an injustice. The entire range of his art unfolded between these two extremes. In fact, he was a master of the quiet undertone, giving subtle performance that lent authenticity to a vast range of figures.

He imbued all of his roles with enormous intensity, urgency and individuality. In its obituary *Die deutsche Bühne* [The German Stage] magazine commented: “He could identify everything within a character’s ego; down to the last detail, his approach was gentle and sensitive—combined with his truly incomparable voice, which one recognised as soon as he spoke.”

Ganz began his career in theatre and performed on all the major stages in Switzerland, Germany and Austria, working under many of the continent’s most important theater directors, such as Peter Löffler, Peter Zadek, Peter Stein and Claus Peymann, among others. He also acted in films directed by dozens of filmmakers, including Wenders, Éric Rohmer, Volker Schlöndorff, Werner Herzog, Mauro Bolognini, Alain Tanner, Gillian Armstrong, Jonathan Demme, Francis Ford Coppola and Bille August.

Although Hollywood took note of him years ago, he was never interested in becoming a commercial film personality. He was anything but a star, and never scrambled for attention. Although he never received an Academy Award, he won many awards and prizes in the field of the performing arts, and with complete justification. Ganz’ ability to fill a wide variety of roles resided in his capacity for introspection combined with

profound study of the theme of the play or movie and the world as a whole.

He was the holder of the Iffland-Ring [1] from 1996 until his death, an honour handed down from one artist to whomever he or she regards as “the most significant and worthy stage artist in the German-speaking theatre.”

Bruno Ganz was born on March 22, 1941 and grew up in Seebach, a suburb of Zurich. His father was a factory worker, his Italian mother travelled to Zurich on foot across the Alps to work as domestic help. As he stressed, his home as a youth was the unspectacular neighbourhood of Seebach, not nearby Zurich, the home of the Swiss finance industry. The district is home today to large numbers of immigrants, particularly from the Balkans, Sub-Saharan Africa and the Indian subcontinent.

Already as a child and a teenager, he was fascinated by the theatre.

Ganz was frequently taken to the theatre by an acquaintance who worked as a lighting technician at Zurich’s main theatre, the Schauspielhaus. From the wings, he was able to watch famous actors and actresses, many of whom had fled Germany during the Nazi era, including the German-Jewish performer Therese Giehse. Later Ganz acted alongside Giehse in Bertolt Brecht’s 1932 play *The Mother* (*Die Mutter*), about a working class Russian woman who becomes involved in revolutionary activity, based on the 1906 novel by Russian writer Maxim Gorky.

Ganz left high school before graduating and became an actor—much to the horror of his parents who wanted him to take up a more practical profession. He began his education in the art of acting, but—to supplement his income—worked for time in a bookstore and also fulfilled his despised military service requirement as a paramedic.

The start of Ganz’ career corresponded to a general mood of rebellious optimism for young people in the 1960s. His work on the stage began at the same Schauspielhaus. The theatre was a centre of intense and often radical activity, as seemed to be the case everywhere. Following a hail of abuse from conservative critics directed against dramaturge and director Peter Löffler and his band of youthful collaborators, the left-wing dramaturge Klaus Völker was summarily dismissed. A large part of the company, including Ganz, promptly resigned in an

act of solidarity.

Ganz then went to the Junges Theater in Göttingen in central Germany, a student theatre, where, he relates, he learnt to speak German properly. In a video interview from 2004 dealing with the most important stages of his life, he recounted the heated debates between young left-wing actors and right-wing law students in Göttingen.

His next stop was Bremen. There he met the young director Peter Stein, who wanted to do explicitly left-wing theatre. After staging the play *Viet Nam Discourse* (1968) by Peter Weiss at the Munich Kammerspiele, Stein was banned from the theatre because he wanted to collect money in solidarity with Vietnam's National Liberation Front after the performance.

Together with Stein, Ganz went to the Berlin Schaubühne, which around 1968 became a focus of left-wing theatre work. At the Schaubühne, Ganz played many leading roles, such as Henrik Ibsen's Peer Gynt and Heinrich von Kleist's Prince of Homburg. The Schaubühne soon became a target of hatred for Berlin's Christian Democrats (CDU), who sought to slash its subsidies, arguing the theatre was a "Communist cell," where "primitive agitation classes" had replaced real art.

Stein once again turned to Ganz for his legendary performance in Goethe's *Faust*, a project for the Expo 2000 in Hanover. The first and second parts of the drama were to be performed for a total of 22 hours over two evenings. Unfortunately, Ganz was so badly injured during a rehearsal he had to be replaced at the premiere. Later, he took over the mammoth role again, including for its television version. Although he was not entirely happy with the role, he played it with his usual *esprit*, employing the full range of his art.

From the mid-1970s onward Ganz was one of the leading figures in the New German Cinema. His earliest roles include the Count (*Graf*) in Éric Rohmer's film adaptation of Kleist's novel, *The Marquise of O* (1976) and Jakov Shalimov in Peter Stein's *Summerfolk* (*Sommergäste*), an adaptation of a 1904 Gorky play.

Directed both times by Wim Wenders, Ganz played leading roles in *The American Friend* (adapted from Patricia Highsmith's *Ripley's Game* and *Ripley Under Ground*) in 1977 and *Wings of Desire* in 1987. He also featured prominently in Werner Herzog's *Nosferatu the Vampyre* (1978) and Volker Schlöndorff's *Circle of Deceit* (1981), with Hanna Schygulla. According to Ganz himself, among the most interesting films he made at the time was *Knife in the Head* (1978, directed by Reinhard Hauff), in which he plays a man with a head injury, who loses not only lost his memory, but also a significant part of his motor skills and language.

Bruno Ganz' particular strength lay in his portrayal of sensitive, thoughtful intellectuals or dropouts with a critical view of society. He was also able, however, to play very different roles.

His portrayal of Adolf Hitler in *The Downfall* (2004) has become world famous. It was, in his own words, one of his

biggest challenges. He hesitated a long time before taking on such an "extremely complicated" role. He went on to assume the speech and mannerisms of the Nazi dictator in a way that send chills down the spine of any audience member.

In *The Baader Meinhof Complex* (2008, directed by Uli Edel), a film dealing with the terrorist Red Army Faction, Ganz played Horst Herold, the president of the Federal Criminal Police. In the same year, under the direction of Rainer Kaufmann, he co-starred with Monika Bleibtreu in the television movie *Ein starker Abgang* [A Stronger Finish], portraying an apparent hypochondriac and writer on his last reading tour, who gets diagnosed with colon cancer. The German television channel ZDF aired the film the day after Ganz' death.

One of Ganz' last film roles was in *The Tobacconist* (2018, directed by Nikolaus Leytner), in which he portrayed Sigmund Freud. A year earlier, he played the great-grandfather Wilhelm Powileit in Matti Geschonneck's film adaptation of Eugen Ruge's novel, *In Times of Fading Light*. In total, Ganz accrued more than 120 film and television credits from 1960 to 2018.

Ganz was also a lover of classical music. In memory of the great actor, the ARTE channel broadcast a production of Beethoven's music for Goethe's *Egmont* from the 2012 Lucerne Festival under the direction of conductor Claudio Abbado. Bruno Ganz read from the text of Goethe's tragedy.

In the summer of 2018, he was scheduled to play the narrator in Mozart's opera *The Magic Flute* at the Salzburg Festival in Austria. He had to stop rehearsing, however, on medical advice after he was diagnosed with the colon cancer, whose complications reportedly led to his death.

[1] The ring is named after the German theatre director and actor August Wilhelm Iffland (1759-1814), whose portrait is featured on the diamond-studded iron ring. Iffland was born in the same year as Friedrich Schiller and played Franz Moor in the Mannheim premiere of Schiller's famed drama *The Robbers*. Bruno Ganz was awarded the Iffland ring in 1996 by the Austrian actor Josef Meinrad in the latter's will. The new recipient remains unclear. Ganz's own choice, the outstanding actor Gert Voss, died in 2014.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact