

# Theatres in Germany take a stand against the far right

Verena Nees  
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A number of plays by the Austrian-Hungarian dramatist and novelist Ödön von Horváth (1901-1938) are currently being staged in leading German theatres. His down-to-earth and socially critical plays and novels, which took a clear stand against the rise of the Nazis and had success in the 1930s, assume new relevance today.

Horváth's works (including *Sladek*, *Italian Night*, *Tales from the Vienna Wood*, *Faith, Hope and Charity*, *Youth Without God*) were banned in 1933 despite the author's own efforts to adapt to the Nazis. He was expelled from Germany in 1936 and died aged just 37 following a tragic accident during his exile in Paris. Only later, during the period of student revolt in the 1960s, did his plays return to German stages.

In Berlin, two theatres, the Schaubühne and the Maxim Gorki Theatre, are currently staging pieces by Horváth. *Italian Night*, directed by Thomas Ostermeier at the Schaubühne, premiered last November. This summer, and in collaboration with the Salzburg Festival, Ostermeier also staged Horváth's 1937 novel *Youth Without God*. It received its premiere at the Berlin Schaubühne on September 7.

Already last spring, director Nurkan Erpulat staged *Youth Without God* at the Maxim Gorki Theatre. Additional theatrical productions of the novel have been held in Münster, Düsseldorf and Bochum. On the occasion of the 80th anniversary of Horváth's untimely death, the Theatre Museum in Vienna honoured the writer with an exhibition, "I'm not thinking, I'm only saying it, Ödön von Horváth and the Theatre," which ended in February 2019 and is now on show (until November 17, 2019) at the Deutsches Theatermuseum in Munich.

The staging of these plays and exhibitions is clearly a reaction by leading directors and dramatists to the current political situation, characterised by the renewed rise to prominence of ultra-right organisations, wars and social inequality. Countless German cultural institutions, including many theatres, have declared their support for the "Declaration of the Many" and made clear they oppose the provocations launched by the far-right and racist Alternative for Germany (AfD). The Maxim Gorki Theatre and the Schaubühne are both signatories to the statement, which begins with the words: "As creators of arts and culture in Germany we do not stand above things. Rather we have both feet firmly on the ground—the very ground upon which one of the worst state crimes against humanity was committed."

The years in which German theatre was dominated by subjective navel-gazing, the complete distortion of classical works and postmodern gimmickry may be over.

## Italian night

*Italian Night*, which premiered in Berlin in 1931, deals with the failure and divisions in the parties of the working class when confronted with the

rise of the Nazis. When fascists march in front of a tavern in a southern German town and the situation becomes more threatening, a complacent social-democratic city councillor (in the original Horváth version a republican) goes ahead with a long-planned celebration, the Italian Night. The local bureaucrat excludes a young worker who regards himself as a Marxist and wants to physically take on the fascists with his friends. The fascists then surround the tavern and force the social-democratic bureaucrat to sign a statement declaring that he is "just an ordinary bastard."

The accompanying brochure to the play includes a section from "A Letter to a Social Democratic Worker" penned by Leon Trotsky, in which he advocates a united front for defence between the SPD and the German Communist Party (KPD) to oppose the impending Hitler dictatorship. Director Ostermeier distorts Trotsky's tactical initiative in the 1930s by presenting it as a role-model for a present-day alliance with the Left Party and pseudo-left tendencies that are neither left-wing nor Marxist. These organisations explicitly reject any struggle to mobilise the working class and instead hold high the banner of gender and identity politics.

Notwithstanding these objections, Ostermeier's staging of *Italian Night* is a very relevant appeal for a struggle against the return of fascism and at the same time a biting satire about the political bankruptcy of the SPD.

## Youth Without God

In *Youth Without God*, Horváth deals with the opportunism of middle-class intellectuals. In 1935, the Nazis had already been in power for two years and were striving to inoculate German youth with militarism and racism—Goebbels's propaganda machine was up and running. A teacher (excellently played in the Schaubühne by Jörg Hartmann) tries to come to terms with the Nazis in order not to lose his job and thus his civil servant's pension. His opposition to the Nazis initially takes place only in the form of internal dialogue.

He corrects school essays in which openly racist thinking is propagated, such as "All negroes are deceitful, cowardly and lazy." In Ostermeier's production, the text reads, "All Africans..." and immediately we are in the present, in today's world of fascist propaganda directed against refugees from Africa and the Middle East.

The teacher leaves the statement of student N in the essay, although he would prefer to cross it out. After all, one cannot correct something that has been aired on radio as being correct. When returning the essay, however, he cannot prevent himself from stating that Africans are human, too. N's father, a master baker and ardent Nazi, complains to the school director. She also does not want to openly oppose the Nazis, although she had signed a peace appeal prior to 1933.

In an internal dialogue, the teacher gives vent to his contempt for the

Nazis: “They hate all types of thought. They have only contempt for humankind! They want to be machines, screws, wheels, pistons, belts—preferably as ammunition rather than machines: as bombs, shrapnel, grenades. How dearly they desire to die on some field! Their dream from puberty is their name on a war memorial.”

At a military education camp, the murder of a student takes place in which the teacher is indirectly involved. When another student is falsely accused, the teacher plucks up his courage and tells the truth in court—he admits his complicity, loses his job and encourages others to resist as well.

This character bears a significant resemblance to Horváth himself and his own, unsuccessful, efforts to appease the Nazi Reich Chamber of Culture. Horváth withdrew his signature from a protest telegram to the P.E.N. Congress and his commitment to participate in the exile journal *Die Sammlung*. He was subsequently the subject of much criticism from anti-fascist writers.

The staging of *Youth Without God* at the Schaubühne adheres to the historical text. In an interview, Ostermeier said that his aim was not to transfer events to the present “one to one,” but rather to see them as a “parable” for “how to pluck up the courage to tell the truth and how this can have an exemplary effect on the spirit of resistance of others.”

In this context, the question of religion is raised, as Horváth’s title suggests. “God is truth,” the teacher explains at the end. Previously, in a splendid conversation with a pastor, he asked why the church is always on the side of the rich. “Because the rich always win,” the pastor says. “The rich will always win because they are more brutal, more deceitful, more ruthless.”

The piece ends with the journey of the African (in Horváth’s text, the Negro, as the teacher was secretly called by his students) to “Africa”—a synonym for solidarity with the marginalised and oppressed, be it the poor, Jews, other minorities or refugees from Africa.

## Postmodern falsification

The version of *Youth Without God* shown at the Maxim Gorki Theatre takes an opposite direction. The postmodernist playwright Nurkan Erpulat and the screenwriter Tina Müller, who are highly praised in theatre circles, leave almost nothing left of Horváth’s analysis of petty-bourgeois cowardice faced with fascism.

Horváth’s text has been mutilated, cut down and rewritten. The protagonist is no longer a teacher, and the focus is no longer his inner dialogues, his turmoil and vacillation. Instead, the protagonists are his students who turn the tables on their peers and accuse the older generation of their parents and teachers of being hypocritical representatives of political correctness.

Horváth’s anti-capitalist and socially critical passages have been excised. The alleged language of the young people, alternating between insults and rage, in part seemingly naive but repeatedly just outright cynical, has less to do with reality and reflects much more the ideas of an upper middle class for whom questions of gender and identity are the central issue.

The ensemble of seven young actors play the school class, committed and full of verve. But one is left with the impression that the director seeks to counter Horváth’s own approach and presume that for young people today the question of left and right is no longer relevant and that everything can be reduced to man’s innate tendency towards egoism and violence.

In fact, we are experiencing a situation in which young people in particular protest against the far-right AfD and are increasingly expressing support for anti-capitalist, socialist policies.

In the version by Nurkan Erpulat, however, the adolescents shout slogans such as everyone has a “shitty part,” they all just think of themselves, and we must learn “that humans are also animals,” or in the spirit of Nietzsche, “In this system, will counts for nothing, against this system will is everything.”

The blame for racist opinions lies with opportunist adults who believe they have to teach young people social behaviour. The worst example, according to the student N, is a lecture by the teacher about the AfD in which the teacher claims that the AfD is “very, very dangerous. But nobody understands why.” Pupil Z responds that the teacher just wants to liberate himself from the “collective guilt” of all Germans in a “pseudo-left, I know everything better” tone.

This reflects the cynical attitude which is so admired in some media circles. For example, RBB24 radio editor Fabian Wall Meier described the Maxim Gorki staging as “powerful,” while denouncing the Schaubühne version as “boring, predictable and staid.” In the *taz* newspaper, Jürgen Berger accused Ostermeier of “conventional historicisation.”

Such claims are completely unfounded. On the contrary, Ostermeier’s production is much more authentic and penetrating, because it raises the historical parallels.

However, it also points to another weakness. Ostermeier’s version tends to explain the rise to prominence of the AfD on the basis of the alleged reactionary thinking of workers. Why does Ostermeier, as opposed to Horváth, cite at the beginning of the play a letter from a Nazi party supporter from Braunschweig in 1935, who thanks Hitler for eliminating unemployment? Jörg Hartmann appears in front of the audience in modern clothing and reads this letter as if it were his own opinion. He then changes his clothes and puts on the brown uniform of the Nazi era for his role as a teacher.

It is also no coincidence that Ostermeier and his writer Florian Borchmeyer have also cut the excellent point in the dialogue between the teacher and school director, which shows the relationship between capitalism and fascism. Commenting on the remark by the director, “We live in a plebeian world,” the young teacher says: “As far as I know, we are not ruled by poor plebeians, only money rules.” The director corrects him by declaring that in ancient Rome there were also rich plebeians.

The teacher ponders: “Of course! The rich plebeians left the people and together with the already somewhat decadent patricians formed the new official nobility, the so-called optimates.” And later he states: “When the rich plebeians in ancient Rome feared that the people could push through their demand to lower taxes, they retreated into the tower of dictatorship.”

Here, Horváth is clearly a step ahead of the Schaubühne production, making clear that dictatorships develop in response to the radicalisation of the population.

In reality, the political ascent of the AfD does not flow from any turn to the right on the part of the working class, but is rather a reaction by the ruling elite to a shift to the left and increasing social resistance.



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