

Big Bang Theory

Germany's Queer Operetta Revolution

Kevin Clarke



A chorus line of androgynous dancers in flesh-colored bodysuits and with sparkling Swarovski gems for abstracted genital areas swirl around the stage of the Komische Oper Berlin to Paul Abraham's title tune from *Ball im Savoy* (2013). As the waltz enters their systems like meth, they simulate all sorts of acts of copulation until they finally shove their rears to the audience. They put their hands through their legs and start clapping in 3/4-time in front of their anuses, which makes the hands look like gaping holes, ready to devour anything that might pass by. Or as if to say, their hands mimicking mouths, puppet-style: What are you looking at? Then they turn around and dissolve back into the sex party atmosphere they had enhanced in act 2 of this long-forgotten 1932 operetta. The heroine has an orgasm while a suitor sucks her finger while the other heroine grabs a boy toy character and takes him to a *chambre séparée*. The third heroine, who speaks with a thick Polish accent, looks like a drag queen who wants to devour the tenor-with-an-extra-large-schlong, while the rest of the company humps one another, regardless of age and shape, sex or gender. Welcome to the 2013 reimagined world of Weimar Republic operetta!¹

1. See the trailer of *Ball im Savoy* at www.youtube.com/watch?v=bMTIDieKwco.

If there ever was such a thing as a big bang in post–World War II operetta performance history in Germany, East or West, it was the queer revolution that swept the reunited country in the new millennium. Berlin was the epicenter of this revolution, which was brought to the attention of a wider public and the international press by the self-declared “gay Jewish kangaroo” Barrie Kosky, who in 2012 became artistic director of Komische Oper Berlin. One of the Australian’s missions for his company was to rediscover and revive operettas by Jewish authors and artists from the Weimar Republic, shows that had premiered successfully in Berlin but were branded “degenerate” by the Nazis. As a result, they were removed from all repertoires until long after 1945, indicating that the shadow of Nazism has extended—unobserved and/or silently accepted by many—well into the 21st century.

Kosky wanted to address this exclusion, not by stressing the tragic tales of the artists involved, but through an avowedly queer reading of the genre that emphasizes previously overlooked LGBTQ perspectives and celebrates the subversive joy these works once radiated. These operettas championed the emancipation from outmoded pre–World War I morals, nudity of both male and female performers, new empowered roles for woman, the first tentative acknowledgment of LGBTQ desire and queer bodies, Dadaistic nonsense, cosmopolitanism, and the refusal to stick to traditional generic categories. Kosky wanted to salute the positive aspects of German culture pre-1933 and remind audiences that Berlin, like Vienna, once had a thriving creative commercial entertainment industry comparable to Broadway and the West End, which was in direct conversation with both. This transatlantic commercial entertainment industry was destroyed after 1933 with the introduction of state subsidies for all theatres and the severing of international ties. Forthwith German stage and film operettas stayed inside the Großdeutsches Reich; they were no longer sought-after export goods that might have been picked up on opening night by agents for foreign theatre managers such as New York’s Shubert Brothers. New shows and films no longer followed public demand. Instead, increasingly after 1933, products adhered to the new political guidelines, with theatres filled by *Kraft durch Freude* (strength through joy) worker groups and soldiers on leave.² The old cosmopolitan, market-oriented popular entertainment industry never returned, not even after the Nazis were defeated, since both newly founded German states, the West German Bundesrepublik Deutschland (BRD) and the East German Deutsche Demokratische Republik (DDR), kept culture under political control after 1949 by continuing the all-inclusive state subsidy system. Historian of popular musical theatre Wolfgang Jansen remarked: “This form of nationalized theatre proved disastrous for musical entertainment; there is no other way of putting it” (2012:53).

The “disaster” was the labeling as problematic of anything even remotely reminiscent of frivolous entertainment. In the East, entertainment was seen as a leftover from late bourgeois times, an

Figure 1. (previous page) Dagmar Manzel and dancers in the Barrie Kosky production of Ball im Savoy. Komische Oper Berlin, 2013. (Photo by Iko Freese / www.drama-berlin.de)

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2. All translations, unless otherwise indicated, are my own.

extension of American capitalism. In the West, the new cultural elite saw entertainment as a continuation of Joseph Goebbels's brainwashing of the masses. The imperative of leading intellectuals such as Theodor W. Adorno that art should be free of the restrictions of standardized, deadening mass culture became part of the official *Bildungsauftrag* (educational mandate) connected with state subsidies for the arts, whose purpose was to stimulate critical thinking. Adorno's famous slogan was "Vergnügtsein heißt einverstanden sein"—to be entertained means to be in agreement (Horkheimer and Adorno [1944] 2013:153; 2002:115). Commercial entertainment—the birthplace of *all* pre-1933 operettas—was by definition suspicious.

Pace Adorno and disciples, there was an audience that desired to be entertained and needed escapism, especially amid the ruins of postwar Germany. Audiences battling suppressed guilt about the Holocaust and not able to openly address their own traumas (loss of family members, jobs, homes, and beliefs, mass rape by soldiers, displacement, etc.) increasingly saw operetta, at least in the West, as a safe, apolitical space where a problem-free nirvana in 3/4-time was offered. Journalist and philosopher Bertram K. Steiner wrote as late as 1997:

One arrives at operetta as a veteran of existentialism, after one has realized that progress and regression lead to the same inferno. For radicals and bigots of all coloring, for immoral optimists, operetta is a horror. They will learn soon enough how idiotically soothing it is. (1997:22)

Operetta, according to this definition, was a "painkiller" (22).³

The (Re-)Birth of Operetta in the Spirit of Pornography

Barrie Kosky broke free from the postwar tradition of operetta-as-painkiller; instead, he adhered to Kurt Gänzl's characterization of 19th-century operetta à la Jacques Offenbach and Hervé:

They were pieces that were written with a zany, Monty-Pythesque type of burlesque humour, extravagantly—even ridiculously—funny. [...] With music that was willing and eager to echo the crazy flavour of the story and fit the most madcap moments of the text. (1995:13)

In emphasizing craziness and burlesque, zaniness and madness, Kosky cast doubt upon previously cherished concepts and disrupted operetta's seemingly fixed formula. His queering was a removal of the genre from its previously assigned categories, allowing audiences to look at operettas in new and counterintuitive ways. Additionally, Kosky emphasized sexuality and homoeroticism, bringing a gay sensibility to the genre that was not new, but had never before been promoted so proudly and publicly (and with the blessing of and funding from Berlin's Senator for Culture).

The first production of Kosky's revival project was the jazz-infused *Ball im Savoy* (Ball at the Savoy) in 2013. Originally premiering in Berlin in December 1932, a month before the Nazi takeover, *Ball im Savoy* (music by Paul Ábrahám, libretto by Alfred Grünwald and Fritz Löhner-Beda) is about the Marquis de Faublas and his wife Madeleine who return from their honeymoon to confront infidelity. The twist of the plot is that Madeleine, upon hearing that her husband is planning a rendezvous behind her back with Argentinean dancer Tangolita at the ball of the Savoy Hotel in Nice, decides to go there herself incognito and have sex with the first man she encounters as revenge. When she unmask herself at the height of the act 2 finale, publicly announcing she's just had intercourse with a stranger, she becomes the Jeanne d'Arc of free-spirited women all over France (*Jungfrau von Orleans* in the German libretto, the Virgin of Orleans, making the punchline deliberately ridiculous and blasphemous). Madeleine is seen as the leader of a new feminist movement that doesn't just demand equal voting rights, but equal sexual freedom. Madeleine is backed by her best friend Daisy Darlington, an American composer

3. See songs from a 1971 production of *Die Fledermaus* at www.youtube.com/watch?v=NAmrZMvKy-A.

who pretends to be a South American man so her Latinx music gets performed (impresarios would reject work by a woman, she says). Daisy, too, reveals her true identity during the finale of act 2 and demands equal opportunities for female composers. She is also seen in various intimate scenes, duetting with her bosom buddy Madeleine with noticeable suggestions of lesbianism. Kosky speaks of “a whole layer of bisexuality” in the show that he moved into the spotlight (Kosky and Lenz 2020:292). In 1932, *Ball im Savoy*'s plot was perfectly in sync with the gender politics and LGBTQ activism propagated by people like Magnus Hirschfeld and his Institut für Sexualwissenschaft (the Institute for Sex Research, which opened in Berlin in 1919). It was also in sync with the behavior of first-wave feminist stars like Marlene Dietrich, walking the streets of Berlin in a tuxedo while her friend Claire Waldoff celebrated lesbian love and female empowerment with songs such as “Raus mit den Männern aus dem Reichstag” (Out with the Men from the Reichstag).

The Ábrahám show was forced to cancel in March 1933, despite glowing reviews and an all-star cast that included Gitta Álpár as Madeleine and Rosy Barsony as Daisy. The content of *Ball im Savoy* was not what the Nazi authorities wished to promote, not to mention its Jewish composer, librettists, cast, and producers. The *Savoy* music, with its mixture of rousing waltzes (in the ball scene) and the latest jazz crazes (including a “Kangaroo Foxtrot”), was the Nazi definition of “degeneracy.” Instead, they hailed the waltz, and particularly the Viennese waltz, as “the most shining example of a German national dance,” which was to “cure” the world of the “sick twitchings of a deeply damaged life,” as Fritz Klingenberg put it (1940:93). Accordingly, programming in Germany, and Austria after 1938, was “adjusted” to conform to the oppressive regulations of the Third Reich with the help of the newly established *Reichsdramaturgie* run by former journalist Rainer Schlösser and his staff. After the 1938 *Anschluss* (the annexation of Austria) the Nazis established the famous New Year's concert from Vienna to celebrate the superior glory of the Strauss waltz. This tradition lives on today as one of the most lucrative classical music events in the world.

Ábrahám mixed the waltz, and its “deep empathy for the German soul,” with “negroid rhythms” and “ecstatic negroid movement,” which represented an “enemy Negro curse for Europe,” a *feindliche Negergeißel* in Nazi terminology (Klingenberg 1940:93). To stop such “shameless derailing,” Nazi troops entered the theatre and disrupted performances, and performers were beaten up by Nazis in the streets, creating a climate of anti-Semitic terror. Many of the people involved in *Ball im Savoy* went into exile. Some, including the impresario brothers Fritz and Alfred Rotter, the former a known cross-dresser, died while on the run from the Nazis or in a concentration camp, as did librettist Fritz Löhner-Beda, who wrote the famous “Buchenwald Lied” in KZ Buchenwald, near Weimar. Ábrahám escaped Nazi Germany but spent many postwar years in psychiatric hospitals in New York. Gitta Álpár went to Hollywood and lived a Norma Desmond kind of life sitting by her pool with her poodles. Librettist Grünwald worked for the US Office of War Information translating American songs broadcast into Germany. Rosy Barsony returned to Hungary and waited for the war to end, restarting her career in Italy after 1945.

When the Nazis were defeated in May 1945 and the repertoire in Germany was freed of restrictions, the *Ball im Savoy* story of sexual liberation and gender equality did not fit the morality of West German postwar society, which was under the strong influence of Christian churches advocating a *christliche Sittenoffensive* (Christian moral offensive) as the only way to start afresh after the horrors of the Third Reich. This offensive led to an era of total suppression of anything different, sexual, and/or queer, along with the massive persecution of LGBTQ persons. The new Federal Republic kept on the books until 1969 the Nazi version of the notorious §175 law that criminalized male homosexuality. The socialist East kept the pre-1933 version of §175 until 1968. The paragraph was only completely eliminated in 1994 in a reunited Germany and it took until 2017 for the government to decide to lift all §175 sentences and pay compensation to men still alive who suffered under this law.

During the antive years in West Germany before 1969, coinciding with a flourishing of *Heimatfilme* (homeland films), celebrating an untouched rural paradise of forests, mountains, and folkloristic dress, a story and score such as *Ball im Savoy* was unthinkable.⁴

When *Ball im Savoy* did return as a West German movie directed by Paul Martin in 1955, all of Abraham's music was replaced with new, tame songs by Lothar Brühne. It was a flop, quickly forgotten. More successful were recordings of classic Johann Strauss operettas such as *Die Fledermaus* (The Bat; 1955) and *Der Zigeunerbaron* (The Gypsy Baron; 1951), conducted at the beginning of the 1950s by Clemens Krauss with the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra. Former Nazi Party member Elisabeth Schwarzkopf recorded the same classic Strauss operettas in the 1950s in a celebrated EMI series, adding *Wiener Blut* (Vienna Blood) and *Eine Nacht in Venedig* (A Night in Venice), plus (twice!) *Die lustige Witwe* (The Merry Widow). For many people, these recordings—symphony orchestras, legitimate opera voices, classical conductors—still represent what operetta should be.⁵

Kosky, however, chose to reconstruct the original *Ball im Savoy* and offered a score that was entirely unfamiliar to even the most ardent operetta aficionados, breaking the unspoken iron rule of sticking to the top 10 classics. Kosky additionally broke free from the standard procedure of “ennobling” operettas with opera singers. The German term *veredeln* is widely used by critics as praise in this context, suggesting that low-quality music can be made more digestible by high-quality singing (Clarke 2006:30). Instead, Kosky used musical comedy stars such as Helmut Baumann and Katharine Mehrling and the well-known film and stage actress Dagmar Manzel, his muse since 2008.⁶

Kosky also brought in dance and eroticized choreography by Otto Pichler as a rediscovered element of the disparaged nude revue aesthetic of the Weimar era, an aesthetic that had been branded as “bad”—to be avoided—by influential German operetta scholar Volker Klotz (1991:95). Kosky took the “bad” revue operetta and presented it with irresistible rhythmic drive and a chorus line of nonstop dancing boys and girls that set the feverish pulse.

Ball im Savoy featured a kind of choreography not seen anywhere on a German operetta stage in decades, a type of choreography inspired by old Hollywood musicals of the Busby Berkeley type. In contrast to Berkeley, Pichler and Kosky put both female and male gym-fit dancers in flesh-colored bodysuits to perform the aforementioned anal clap dance to the title tune. It was a kind of Hollywood-style dancing taken to queer extremes previously unimaginable on a state-subsidized stage, but in a direct historical line from the famous nudity shows that James Klein, Herman Haller, and Erik Charell offered in Berlin's revue temples of the 1920s. It also evoked the playful sex party atmosphere for which the reunited Berlin became famous after 1989. Such events were talked about in the underground scene, but had not been acknowledged in an opera house. In a way, Kosky linked operetta with the Berghain techno club atmosphere that still draws thousands of tourists from all over the world to party like porn stars who simulate sex in their public performances at gay clubs. Kosky put the porn back into operetta, following the advice given in the 2012 exhibition *Welt der Operette* (The World of Operetta) at Theatermuseum Wien, which opened with a section called “The Birth of Operetta in the Spirit of Pornography,” referring to the 19th century in Paris and Vienna when the works of Jacques Offenbach premiered with demimondain and deminude prima donnas onstage, gender-fluid partiers, and theatres operating as brothels (Clarke 2011:19).⁷

4. See an example of the “homeland film” *Schwarzwalddädel* from 1950 at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QxabK-1WkUcU>.

5. See Elisabeth Schwarzkopf singing a number from *Der Opernball* at www.youtube.com/watch?v=WBj5AMiXEi4.

6. See Dagmar Manzel singing “In meinen weissen Armen” (In My White Arms; 1932) by Paul Abraham, accompanied by Barry Kosky at www.youtube.com/watch?v=FkmVKrVZKeA.

7. See Katharine Mehrling in *Ball im Savoy* at www.youtube.com/watch?v=OkOH3VOo3m4.

Like the Pioneers of the Period Instrument Movement

At the beginning of his directorship, Kosky was under pressure to ensure that the opening of his operetta revival series would be a sensation. So he made a U-turn away from his previous work to focus on storytelling, emphasizing the relevance of the *Ball im Savoy* plot. These stories are “fantastic,” he said later in an interview (Kosky and Lenz 2020:291). This, too, was in sharp contrast to the Nazi ideal that operetta should be neither “intellectually substantial” nor “credible” because, as Hans Severus Ziegler (organizer of the infamous *Entartete Musik* [Degenerate Music] exhibition) pointed out in 1939, such intellectually facile shows were perfect for the “broader circles of people.” According to Ziegler these people would be thankful in their “own hard battles of life” for an anti-intellectual muse (1939:4). This ideal cemented the notion that plots and words in operetta were superfluous, that the genre was all about the music, which should be presented in a “tasteful” and “musically meticulous” way so as to lead from one musical gem to the next. Many Germans still believe that in operetta one should get through the dialogue as quickly as possible and pay no attention to the supposedly meaningless lyrics. While the principle of minimizing plot and going from one number to the next characterized Kosky’s earlier *Kiss Me, Kate* at the Komische Oper in 2008 (before he was appointed artistic director), he radically changed his approach for *Ball im Savoy*. No doubt some of the impetus came from musical director Adam Benzwi (with whom Kosky collaborated for the first time), who was known for stressing the value of words in music and uncovering nuance in the lyrics. It was a return to the long-ignored style, and glory, of once-celebrated operetta divas such as Fritzi Massary, the unsurpassed prima donna of Weimar Republic operetta, notorious for saturating every line with doubles entendres.⁸ She had started her career in the early 20th century at Metropol-Theater in their famous revues before moving on to operettas by Emmerich Kálmán, Leo Fall, and Oscar Straus. In her honor, Kosky later renamed the grand foyer of the Komische Oper the Massary Lounge.

By casting the star actress Dagmar Manzel in *Ball im Savoy*, performing in a typical Massary style, and bringing in experienced musical comedy performers Mehrling and Baumann, Kosky gave equal attention to the scenes between the musical numbers and showed that they were an integral part of the show and of the genre itself. Similarly, the opulent dance sequences were left intact unlike in most postwar productions of operetta that reduced the dance to nothing more than an afterthought to the singing. The original score—with the characteristic Ábrahám sound—was reconstructed for this production by Matthias Grimminger and Henning Hagedorn and then adapted by Benzwi, who accompanied the performances from the piano in the pit. It’s an eclectic sound that was already considered revolutionary back in 1930, when Ábrahám’s first German-language operetta *Viktoria und ihr Husar* (Victoria and Her Hussar) premiered at the Metropol-Theater. This sound incorporated a full jazz band into the orchestra and introduced radical instrumental effects as specialty acts unheard of even in the most advanced jazz operettas by older masters, or even Kurt Weill. In *Ball im Savoy* Ábrahám took his experimentation with orchestral effects to new levels, letting different instrumental groups clash almost *concerto grosso*-style for maximum contrast. It can still be heard in the 1935 film version, which Ábrahám himself conducts, although the film version was ignored and later forgotten as it was not considered properly classical.⁹

The *Tagesspiegel* agreed that the rediscovery of the original Ábrahám sound was groundbreaking: “With Adam Benzwi, Kosky engaged the best musical comedy musician in town, who infuses the orchestra of Komische Oper with his knowledge of historic performance practice, like the pioneers of the period instrument movement, based on their study of the original Baroque scores” (Hanssen

8. Find a recording of Fritzi Massary at www.youtube.com/watch?v=elPOjAmzptE.

9. See Paul Ábrahám conduct *Viktoria und ihr Husar* at www.youtube.com/watch?v=J1P0tSH5IIs.

2013). Even the review in the left-wing publication *taz*, not known for pro-operetta attitudes, was jubilant: “Everything is as colorful, high-pitched, and sexy as possible. Berlin audiences probably also got to see bare flesh with the Rotter brothers [the producers of *Ball im Savoy* back in 1932], after all Josephine Baker danced right next door back then. With Mr. Kosky we get to see skin-colored body condoms (*Ganzkörperkondome*) dancing amidst all the drag queens” (Hablützel 2013). On top of all this, Kosky introduced subtitles in German, English, Turkish, and French for the entire show (seen on the back of the seat in front of each viewer) to make *Ball im Savoy* as accessible as possible for international audiences.

Delay and Resistance

Is all this queer? Not in the sense used by some contemporary queer activists/theorists who question truth and power structures from a postmodern point of view, linking LGBTQ activism intersectionally with feminism, antiracism, and anticolonial struggle. However, the political correspondent for the *Irish Times* in Berlin, Derek Scally, argues from an Anglo-American point of view:

Barrie Kosky’s productions are one long gender-bender. He’s taken a traditional, East German audience and confronted them with new-to-you productions of old works that have smashed open the windows to the present. In the classic salesman mode, he sold them something they didn’t realize they wanted. And they loved it. I think he has taken a light approach: shown queer to be a broader lens of looking at artistic material, and life itself. (in Clarke 2020)

Academia has mostly ignored operetta. The standard Anglophone monograph, Richard Traubner’s *Operetta: A Theatrical History*, even in its updated 2003 version, states that the genre was “flowing champagne, ceaseless waltzing, risqué couplets, Graustarkian uniforms and glittering ballgowns, romancing and dancing,” not to mention “gaiety and lightheartedness, sentiment and Schmalz” ([1983] 2003:vii). This description was and (alas!) still is the way many audiences and scholars think about operetta. In Germany, Volker Klotz revived serious interest in the genre in 1991 when he opened his book about operetta as an “unerhörte Kunst” (unheard of/exceptional art form) with the now famous line: “Die Operette ist besser als ihr Ruf” (operettas are better than they are rumored to be). He added: “They could still today be what they were a hundred years ago—a singular, progressive, vital, and vitalizing art. They are neither outdated nor irrelevant, even if their moronic performers present them today to us that way, onstage and in other outlets” (1991:15). Klotz’s highly influential method was to categorize the genre into “good” and “bad” operettas, writing thrilling appraisals of the “good” works that adhered to the satiric style of Offenbach, whose works ridiculed conservatism and authority. This was a typical approach for Klotz, a representative of the left-wing 1968 student revolt generation in Germany.

But as brilliant as Klotz’s discussions are, he does not focus on sexuality or any LGBTQ issues. He also does not address the genre’s turbulent political history. That did not happen until 2005, when Staatsoperette Dresden announced a conference entitled *Operette unterm Hakenkreuz* (Operetta under the Swastika), which I conceived and organized. It was the first time the politics of Nazi operettas were discussed openly and broadly. The conference made a big splash in the German press and academia. Many publications on Nazi operetta politics followed, including a print edition of the Dresden conference papers (Schaller 2007). Parallel to this, many well-restored historic recordings of jazz operettas were made available for the first time on CD, including discs devoted to Paul Ábrahám, Gitta Alpár, Rosy Barsony, and others released by Duophon Records in Berlin. As a result, a historical revisionist movement was underway by the 2010s, but it did not change actual operetta performance practices. That awaited the arrival of Kosky.



Figure 2. Dagmar Manzel (left) and Max Hopp in Kosky's production of *Eine Frau, die weiß, was sie will*. Komische Oper Berlin, 2015. (Photo by Iko Freese / www.drama-berlin.de)

Glitter and Be Gay

As operetta was being reframed with revue and jazz operettas from the Weimar era attracting new interest, a third important impulse came in 2007 in the form of the first study of operetta and homosexuality, my edited collection of essays *Glitter and Be Gay: Die authentische Operette und ihre schwulen Verehrer* (Authentic Operetta and Her Gay Male Fans).¹⁰ It was the first book anywhere discussing the genre in relation not only to homosexuality, but to *any* form of sexuality. Some established Anglo-American operetta researchers who considered the very idea disreputable declined to contribute because they feared that the topic would stain and/or defile the genre, and by extension, themselves. Only Richard C. Norton (*A Chronology of American Musical Theater*) and Kurt Gänzl (*Encyclopedia of the Musical Theatre*) agreed to write essays. Other researchers steadfastly refused, having experienced the stigma of being openly gay in the 1950s, '60s, and '70s, and also during the homophobic panic of the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s and '90s.

The publication of *Glitter and Be Gay* was a critical success, which led me to curate the first exhibition at the Schwules Museum Berlin about the queer aspects of operetta and revues from the 1920s. This exhibition focused on the life and oeuvre of producer/director Erik Charell, creator, with composer Ralph Benatzky, of *Im weißen Rössl* (The White Horse Inn) and some of the most famous revues of the Weimar era. The exhibit attracted considerable media attention — in and beyond the LGBTQ community — in the summer of 2010, probably because *Rössl* is extremely well-known in Germany and Austria. A popular 1960 film version starring Peter Alexander and Waltraut Haas is shown regularly on German TV and sometimes

10. The main title of my book references the 1956 song of the same title by Leonard Bernstein (music) and Lillian Hellman (libretto) for the operetta *Candide*.

presented by LGBTQ groups in sing-along performances (à la *The Sound of Music*) with audiences in dirndls and lederhosen (Tautscher 2007:89).¹¹

Dagmar Manzel — who appeared in *Coming Out* in 1989, the first DDR movie about homosexuality — came to see the exhibition, not just as an LGBTQ ally, but in preparation for her upcoming role in an ill-fated *Rössl* at the Komische Oper, which had collaborated by donating photos and helping with press work for the exhibition. Three years later, it was the Komische Oper that took the exhibition's core messages to the next level with Kosky's *Ball im Savoy* celebrating everything Charell stood for. Kosky offered carefree entertainment, yet in the end turned the fun around with an a capella finale, the bittersweet waltz “Good Night” (“Reich mir zum Abschied noch einmal die Hände”; give me your hands as a final farewell). This tore down the gay façade and reminded audiences of the fate of Abraham and his colleagues — adding a somber message to the topsy turvy abandon. The reviewer from the conservative *Opera News* remarked, somewhat grudgingly: “Kosky is indeed a visionary, but he would do well to show a little more restraint” (Goldmann 2013).

Restraint is exactly what Kosky showed with his next operetta production, *Eine Frau, die weiß, was sie will* (A Woman Who Knows What She Wants; 2015). He reduced the spectacle and presented the 1932 piece by Oscar Straus — originally written for Fritzi Massary — as a two-hander, with Dagmar Manzel and Max Hopp playing all the parts, constantly changing costumes, sometimes even playing two roles/genders at the same time. It was a tour de force with bravura performances at breakneck speed, again with Adam Benzwi in the pit and at the piano. It was so successful that instead of the originally scheduled three performances it became a standard in the Komische Oper repertoire.¹²

In her review for *Deutschlandfunk*, Julia Spinola characterized the production as “a plea for the subversive power of the genre” (2015). With Max Hopp gliding across the stage with an affected



Figure 3. Christoph Marti as Hollywood star Clivia in the Stefan Huber production of *Clivia*. Komische Oper Berlin, 2014. (Photo by Iko Freese / www.drama-berlin.de)

11. See Peter Alexander in a number from *Im weißen Rössl* at www.youtube.com/watch?v=-IhDa4Tutzc.

12. See the trailer for *Eine Frau, die weiß, was sie will* at www.youtube.com/watch?v=pE7Hm3rCui8.



Figure 4. Dagmar Manzel as Cleopatra (right) with Dominik Köninger as the Roman officer Silvius in Kosky's production of *Die Perlen der Cleopatra*, Komische Oper Berlin, 2016. (Photo by Iko Freese / www.drama-berlin.de)

girlish pose as the lovesick Lucy, while Dagmar Manzel played the mundane diva Cavallini as well as her own greatest fan, the lisping Raoul, this production evinced more than the usual queer jokes. It culminated in a scene in which both performers impersonate an entire evening party, which is “so liberating,” Spinola wrote, “it conveys the utopia that age, gender, and social position are not fixed, and that we can take on any identity we dream of” (Spinola 2015).

If the genderfuck performances of Manzel and Hopp made the intimate *Eine Frau, die weiß, was sie will* a queer sensation, then Kosky's next operetta for and with Manzel and Benzwi in 2016 was a return to grand spectacle: Oscar Straus's *Die Perlen der Cleopatra* (The Pearls of Cleopatra), another show originally written in 1923 for Massary. Unlike *Ball im Savoy*, which has many starring roles, *Perlen* focuses exclusively on Manzel as a very contemporary Egyptian queen with a broad—even vulgar—Berlin accent. She is seen in a string of erotic situations with three lovers (one per act), each played differently and with a new conceptual approach. The character of Cleopatra is fractured to

represent sequentially the contradictory aspects of an operetta queen, held together by the congenial Manzel, who constantly changes outfits that range from fat-suit nudity to feathered vamp to disoriented housewife to beer-drinking existentialist who takes off her costume and wig and pretends to be herself, which is yet another trick designed to lure men. Piling layer upon layer of identities and resisting a single coherent narrative represents a kind of queer theatricality. Kosky and Manzel started exploring this “campy queer” with *Eine Frau* but with *Die Perlen der Cleopatra* framed it differently in the context of a madcap Egyptian world mixed with 1920s glamor and modern-day touches (Kosky and Lenz 2020:292). No gendered clothing or genderfuck was needed to make *Perlen der Cleopatra* queer, nor were the emancipatory narratives of *Ball im Savoy* and their lesbian undertones necessary. Here, instead, was a self-assured omniseual woman looking for fulfillment, trying on a sequence of guises, and unabashedly reversing patriarchal power by selecting male lovers from her army of admirers and dressing them up as objects of desire in the most outlandishly revealing outfits. At the same time this Cleopatra had a newly invented celestial cat named Ingeborg (a hand puppet) as her most intimate friend and confidante, along with

the shady prime minister Pampylus whom Kosky has directed to be nonbinary. In conversation with Ingeborg, the Queen of the Nile could utter sexualized jokes about bending over “even if it hurts,” a line whose double entendre went over the heads of most of the audience, while the gay segment roared with laughter. A monologue for Cleopatra about bathing in milk was also inserted as Manzel’s inside joke from her DDR past, where milk-white Cleopatra soap (from the West) was a much sought-after luxury product. Manzel’s wig and costumes at times exactly replicated the famous 1980s Cleopatra soap TV advertisement so admired by women (and gay men) behind the Iron Curtain.¹³

Perlen was the final kick-in-the-ass to the old frothy operetta tradition. The production managed 37 mostly sold-out performances until 2020 when theatres were forced to close because of Covid-19 (Roerber 2021). Kosky’s approach marked the triumph of the Erik Charell style of operetta, newly reborn. When Charell started his reign at the Großes Schauspielhaus in Berlin in 1924, the influential avantgarde art magazine *Querschnitt*’s critic remarked: “Charell wants to present a revue that is contemporary, contemporary like Mozart and the *Kleinwagen* (mini-car), [...] contemporary like the jazz band that has turned the Siegmund racket and Siegfried hoo-ha into laughter or painful shame” (Haacke and von Baeyer 1977:XII).

Alternative Attraction

As the groundbreaking productions with Manzel, Pichler, and Benzwi became long-running audience favorites and signature shows for the Komische Oper, Kosky as artistic director made room for a second operetta series to perform in his house with a different LGBTQ creative team, demonstrating that there was more than one way of queering the genre. Instead of evoking modernity and libertinism, the second series celebrated prudish nostalgia. This second team of operetta crusaders centered on Christoph Marti, aka Ursli Pfister of the cabaret trio Geschwister Pfister. He and the rest of the Pfister cabaret group, Andreja Schneider and Tobias Bonn, came to the Komische Oper from privately owned queer entertainment temples Bar jeder Vernunft and Tipi am Kanzleramt, with their pronouncedly LGBTQ clientele. The Pfisters starred in three new productions at the Komische Oper, all directed by Stefan Huber.¹⁴

The Pfisters were not just any LGBTQ team. Back in 1994 they had sparked the first attempt at a queer operetta revolution in Berlin with their production of *Im weißen Rössl* at Bar jeder Vernunft. It made headlines from *Stern* to *Spiegel* magazines and ushered in a groundbreaking new approach to 1920s revue operetta. Christoph Marti, with a team of well-known actors as well as up-and-coming *Kleinkunst* (cabaret) stars, including Max Raabe and Meret Becker, took the genre seriously, showing the Benatzky/Charell piece to be a substantial dramatic work with psychologically differentiated characters, instead of a string of cliché-ridden Alpine review scenes. This 1994 *Rössl* was filmed for TV and is available on DVD, ensuring that the short-lived cult phenomenon would make a lasting impression. But it did not spark a new assessment of the genre itself and remained a local phenomenon that had become a cherished nostalgic memory by 2014 when the Pfisters returned to operetta in Berlin.¹⁵

In all three of their productions at Komische Oper, Marti played the title role in larger-than-life drag (back in 1994 he had been only the comic sidekick). Around Marti, Stefan Huber arranged hyper-kitsch stagings that would have impressed even Liberace with their overflowing bling-bling effects: swans floating in artificial fog, oversized tropical flowers opening their buds to reveal glittering golden petals. It was the opposite of the 1994 *Rössl* approach. In place of Otto Pichler working with Kosky, the simplistic choreography was by Danny Costello, regrettably without a distinct

13. See a TV ad for Cleopatra soap at www.youtube.com/watch?v=1GL61dqjLPo.

14. See Geschwister Pfister sing “Amor” at www.youtube.com/watch?v=xBhXJcaI1YM.

15. See the trailer for the 1994 TV production of *Im weißen Rössl* at www.youtube.com/watch?v=G-x2AVQueQs.



Figure 5. For her entrance, *Dagmar Manzel emerges from a sarcophagus in Die Perlen der Cleopatra, with her white cat Ingeborg as a puppet on her hand. Komische Oper Berlin, 2016. (Photo by Iko Freese / www.drama-berlin.de)*

personal style, and instead of Adam Benzwi, the conductor was Kai Tietje, who put together anodyne new big band arrangements.

The first production was Nico Dostal's *Clivia* (2014), which had originally premiered at Berlin's Theater am Nollendorfpfatz in December 1933 *after* the Nazi takeover and the start of their radical cleansing of the operetta world; despite having lyrics by gay author Charles Amberg and a book by Franz Massarek the show was not sexually explicit which may be why it was allowed to open. Plus, the composer was Aryan — i.e., not Jewish — and thus representative of the new league of musicians the Nazis wanted to promote. *Clivia* tells the story of recent events on the streets of Berlin during the Nazi seizure of power, but relocates everything to the jungle of a fictional South American country called Boliguay. There, a Hollywood film crew is busy making the latest movie with temperamental US American diva Clivia Gray. However, filming is interrupted by revolutionary turmoil: general Juan Olivero tries to overthrow the government and install a new republic, while the reactionary counterforces financed by Hollywood mogul E.W. Patterton fight back. There are armed female patrol guards marching through the underbrush. Clivia is caught in the middle of the uprising, falling for a sexy gaucho who turns out to be none other than the general himself. Bizarrely, there is also a globetrotter from Berlin, singing about the need for a vacation now and then.¹⁶

In the end, with everyone imprisoned and about to be sentenced, potentially to death, Clivia chooses to stay with general Olivero as first lady of the new republic, renouncing her film career and happy to become a housewife and mother. It's a choice perfectly in line with the new fascist ideals regarding the domestic role of women. The transformation of the very real terror in the Berlin streets into the harmless spectacle of marching female super-troopers is a concept the Nazis

16. See the globetrotter's song at www.youtube.com/watch?v=xEWTNx7o3uY.

used many times over, for example in the well-known 1937 film *Gasparone*, in which the dangerous bandits around whom the story revolves are unmasked as nothing but attractive chorus girls with fake rifles.

To avoid a debate about the rather obvious Nazi ideology of the show, the Komische Oper tried to reframe Dostal's 1933 hit as a late Weimar Republic LGBTQ show by adding pre-Third Reich songs with queer content composed by Dostal. This marketing concept was technically mislabeling, but the production allowed audiences to witness first-hand the changes that started in February 1933 and to compare Dostal's score with Abraham's more explosive jazz style, as well as the sexually liberated content of the Massary/Straus operettas, with "Aryan" plot lines and sound worlds typical of later composers such as Fred Raymond or Peter Kreuder. The latter adapted Lehár's *Lustige Witwe* in 1938 for Munich's Gärtnerplatztheater and created a new jazz version that Adolf Hitler considered the best of his favorite piece of musical theatre (Frey 2020:328). In his autobiography, Kreuder writes that Hitler was totally enthusiastic about the adaptation, despite the Nazi rejection of jazz: "He did not call it jazz, [...] but 'modern rhythms'" (1971:251). You could similarly describe Dostal's *Clivia* as "modern rhythms" that avoid the sonic explosions of Abraham's late Weimar Republic jazz operetta. All of the musical elements in Dostal's score are true to their discreet genres; there is no mixing of waltzes and foxtrots, marches and shimmies. The elements are carefully separated and the big hits are almost frighteningly formulaic (as opposed to Abraham's inventiveness), or operatically overblown, as if that might elevate the genre to new "Aryan" levels of excellence.¹⁷

The Geschwister Pfister production queered *Clivia*, first and foremost, through the cross-dressed title role, originally written for coloratura soprano Lillie Claus and now interpreted by Christoph Marti. His over-the-top portrayal of the peroxide blonde film diva with a raspy baritone à la Robert Preston distracted many spectators and critics from the problematic aspects of the story of a woman who says goodbye to her independence by subordinating herself to a military leader. Marti turned almost every line into high camp and thus made the libretto not only bearable, but often remarkably funny. The same can be said about renowned stage and screen actor Stefan Kurt playing the scheming and evil Hollywood producer Patterson, taking the anti-Semitic edge off the role with his own camp exaggerations.

While the anti-Semitism and antifeminist ideals of *Clivia* were at least somewhat muted by the camp aesthetic, the staging by Stefan Huber remained deliberately conventional. There were no nude dancers doing anal clap dances; there was no choreographic pulse from beginning to end; there was no party-like-a-porn-star atmosphere à la Berghain; there was no challenging of outdated operetta normativity. It was colossal kitsch that nonetheless turned into a success for the Komische Oper. LGBTQ audiences were directly targeted by marketing via a strategic partnership with the magazine *Siegessäule* ("We are queer Berlin"), which promoted the production. This brought in many LGBTQ visitors, who regularly mixed with elderly straight operetta aficionados, who could not see much live operetta elsewhere because the musical houses (Metropol-Theater in East Berlin and Theater des Westens in the West) had been closed in the 1990s by the Berlin Senate. These lovers of old-fashioned operetta showed by their continued attendance that they were willing to accept queer casting and camp readings. And what's more, the two audiences became allies of sorts. Critic Manuel Brug called Marti as *Clivia* "an astral being from outer operetta space" who represented a "hyperartificial and fully synthetic operetta diva" yet "never seems to be a drag queen," rather performs a fully developed character (Brug 2014). The Pfisters proved a gateway for LGBTQ fans to discover other, more conventional shows at the Komische Oper, particularly the concurrently running operettas.

The Geschwister Pfister tried to recreate the *Clivia* success with the Mischa Spoliansky revue *Heute Nacht oder nie* (Tonight or Never; 2015), in which Christoph Marti played erotic dancer Anita

17. See the trailer for *Clivia* at www.youtube.com/watch?v=wlyy8_dsg5c.

Berber, known as the High Priestess of Decadence and a central personality of the Weimar era. Otto Dix famously painted her as the woman in red in *Bildnis der Tänzerin Anita Berber* (Portrait of the Dancer Anita Berber; 1925), which served as a model for the languorous “Morphium” waltz. Berber was close friends with Magnus Hirschfeld, campaigned for sexual liberty, and appeared in the world’s first film depicting homosexuality, *Anders als die Andern* (Different than the Others; 1919), which caused one of the greatest scandals in German film history. While the new revue celebrated lesbian love with the Marlene Dietrich classic “Wenn die beste Freundin” (When the Best of Friends; 1928), it strangely excluded Spoliansky’s legendary 1921 hymn to homosexuality, “Das lila Lied” (The Lavender Song) with its Hirschfeld-inspired refrain “Wir sind nun einmal anders als die andern” (We are different from the others). The Huber production once more presented everything as camp, which didn’t quite fit the tone of the Spoliansky songs, and did not resonate with audiences.¹⁸

Wrapping any hint of decadence in colorful cuteness is, sadly, what also happened with Ábrahám’s soccer operetta *Roxy und ihr Wunderteam* (Roxy and the Wonderteam; 2019), the last of the Stefan Huber productions at the Komische Oper. *Roxy* was Ábrahám’s final German-language operetta, premiering in Vienna in 1937 before the composer was forced into exile in Cuba and later the United States. The sports-themed “vaudeville” (as the score calls it) was originally written to be performed in Budapest at the end of 1936, right after the Berlin Olympic Games, as a spoof of the new heroic Nazi ideals. It tells the story of the Hungarian national soccer team, which loses its most recent match and retreats to a training camp on Lake Balaton. There, the 11 players are supposed to concentrate on nothing but sports and forget about sex, a goal that is turned upside down when 11 girls from a Budapest gymnastics team arrive and share lodgings with the boys. Roxy, a runaway bride, becomes the leader of an antiabstinence revolution in the camp, singing about the joys of a good “hand job” while outlining knitting techniques. She ridicules the new ideal of women staying at home, instead of partying as “in earlier times,” dances a snappy “blackwalk” (Ábrahám’s update of the cakewalk), and leads the football team to a miraculous victory in the finale by bringing the gymnasts to the locker room during intermission. It could not be further from Leni Riefenstahl’s heroic *Olympia* (1938). And of course the blackwalks and sex-filled lyrics were everything the Nazis abhorred, which is why *Roxy* was performed only in Budapest (1936) and Vienna (1937). A 1938 film version starring Rosy Barsony (of *Ball im Savoy* fame) was taken out of circulation in Austria immediately after the *Anschluss*. A copy was rediscovered by the Filmarchiv Austria only in the 2000s and was shown prominently at the *Operette unterm Hakenkreuz* conference, which led to a reconstruction of the score and eventually to the Komische Oper premiere.

Roxy und ihr Wunderteam was played in the nostalgic camp style of earlier Pfister productions: Christoph Marti portrayed Roxy as Jean Harlow’s doppelgänger, but without her daredevil humor. In Marti’s interpretation, Roxy is a woman imprisoned in strangely antiquated ideas of propriety. Because she considers even a kiss before an official engagement unthinkable, the “hand job” lecture seems ridiculously out of place. And though the LGBTQ news portal *queer.de* claimed the production moved between “camp and queer” (Fuchs 2019), it again refused to celebrate sexual liberation or even promiscuity (as the original did). The closest the production got to homoeroticism was the spectacle of 11 football players undressing and showering—as shadows behind a white screen. Instead of subversive eroticism, Huber and his team advocated the most conservative family values. Everything about the production became dully homonormative, banishing radical gay politics, sex, and lifestyle in favor of a new assimilationist normal.¹⁹

18. See the trailer for the Spoliansky revue at www.youtube.com/watch?v=-YXlar7nDUE.

19. See the trailer for *Roxy und ihr Wunderteam* at www.youtube.com/watch?v=agxbit8R88M.

Branching Out

Given the success of the Komische Oper productions with audiences and critics, other Berlin companies followed suit with their own queer readings of operettas. The two major productions were Paul Linke's voyage-to-the-moon-operetta, *Frau Luna* (1899), directed by Bernd Mottl at Tipi am Kanzleramt in 2016; and the lying-about-your-true-identity-in-personal-ads-operetta *Alles Schwindel* (All's a Swindle; 1931) by Mischa Spoliansky directed by Christian Weise at the Maxim Gorki Theater in 2017.

Frau Luna shifted the focus from the Weimar Republic to an earlier period, turn-of-the-20th-century Berlin. The show is considered to have been the first full-fledged Berlin operetta, as opposed to Viennese or French operetta, sparking a new tradition. It celebrates Prussian patriotism with a story about a group of Wilhelmine-era, working-class Berliners who board a homemade spaceship and fly to the moon. There they experience an alien world of sexual liberation, an ideal they bring home with them to Berlin, ringing in a brighter future. The score includes the official *Hauptstadt* hymn, the rousing march, "Das ist die Berliner Luft, Luft, Luft" (That Is the Berlin Air, Air, Air), as well as many other famous songs.

Mottl's staging offered a particularly German queer reading that might also be described as a queer exorcism. A gay director, born in the 1960s and socialized with the operetta programs that ran on West German TV in the '70s, Mottl tried to overcome the trauma of a whole generation of LGBTQ youths, which Christoph Dompke analyzes in his essay "Fernsehoperette als Coming-out-Hilfe?" (TV Operetta as a Coming Out Aid?). Dompke describes highly artificial "glamor shows" with hosts such as soprano Anneliese Rothenberger as the only programs on West German public TV in which everyone was a "freak" and looked "completely different from *anyone* in your neighborhood" (Dompke 2007:205). The performers wore "grotesque outfits" sporting feathers, diamonds, and slick evening wear that contrasted with the ugly social realities of the so-called *Deutscher Herbst* (German Autumn), which was marked by the terror of the RAF (Rote Armee Fraktion), a far-left group that haunted the country with assassinations, kidnappings, bank robberies, and bombings.²⁰

While Germany in the late '70s was in a state of paralysis, Rothenberger and her fellow operetta crusaders Bela Erny, Tamara Lund, and Ingeborg Hallstein presented a seemingly surreal escape from the "stone-gray dreariness" that informed German literature and art at the time, an escape that magically attracted anyone who was different (Dompke 2007:206). Hallstein was one of the most famous opera/operetta singers on German TV in the 1960s and '70s, with a distinct style



Figure 6. Andreja Schneider (right) as *Frau Luna* and Gustav Peter Wöhler as her suitor, *Prinz Sternschnuppe*, in Bernd Mottl's production of *Frau Luna*. Tipi am Kanzleramt, 2016. (© Barbara Braun / Tipi am Kanzleramt)

20. See "1977: Der Herbst des Terrors" at www.youtube.com/watch?v=cs79v-uMT3U.



Figure 7. *The Geschwister Pfister in Frau Luna: (from left) Andreja Schneider in the title role, Tobias Bonn as her Minister of the Interior, and Christoph Marti as landlady Pusebach. Tipi am Kanzleramt, 2016. (© Barbara Braun / Tipi am Kanzleramt)*

of clothing and studio props. While the activist post-1968 student revolt generation saw such shows as the epitome of nostalgic nonsense that should be expunged from TV to make room for more serious topics, many young gay men found their Oz in these programs, which were filled with “schwule Sehnsuchtsfiguren” (figures of gay longing) and offered “schwule Identifikationsmöglichkeiten” (ways for gays to identify) (209). Being a fan made you a total outcast among other school kids, and certainly among the more adult (homophobic) extreme left of the time that fought for equality, but not LGBTQ equality. The TV operetta programs with Rothenberger and Hallstein disappeared soon enough and remain, for many, an embarrassing memory of a time when West Germany was in transition from the postwar silence about Nazi guilt to the open and liberal country that many see it as being today.²¹

Based on this uniquely West German history, Mottl staged *Frau Luna* so that it opens in a narrow and cramped black-and-white world of two-dimensional props representing Berlin of 1899, but just as dreary and oppressive as the *Deutscher Herbst*. He then has his group of space travelers arrive on the moon, which looks like the silvery set of an Ingeborg Hallstein TV show, with oversized flower bouquets, chandeliers, and

the goddess of the moon (Andreja Schneider) costumed in a baby blue ball gown, made to look like an exact replica of Miss Hallstein. While the real TV shows of the '70s were devoid of *anything* sexual, Mottl populates his entire moon society with a motley crew of queer icons who interact nonstop via sexualized jokes and suggestive looks. This fantasy satellite turns the concept of those glitzy TV shows on its head, reimagining the fake moon as the gay boy's heaven, but now with all the LGBTQ elements fully acknowledged and celebrated. This includes a cross-dressed “groom” as housekeeper to Frau Luna, her hypercamp suitor, an overweight God Mars with a high-pitched voice, a sexually wild and funky Venus singing a punk version of the famous song “Glühwürmchen-Idyll” (Glow Worm), while the sizable Berliner Mondharmoniker under conductor/arranger Johannes Roloff accompanies it all with sweet orchestral sounds that make the interpretation seem even more out of this world. The same can be said of almost everyone in this production, including Christoph Marti as the severe landlady Pusebach who encounters a one-night stand she had met in Tiergarten park, who, it turns out, is the moon's prime minister and once looked for kicks down on earth. (The Tiergarten is still a notorious cruising ground for gay men.) Pusebach has to admit that she was seduced by an irresistible extraterrestrial, played by Tobias Bonn, the third of the *Geschwister Pfister* trio, who are all part of the large LGBTQ ensemble.²²

21. See Ingeborg Hallstein in a TV segment at www.youtube.com/watch?v=dD43qG2R5Yo.

22. See the trailer for *Frau Luna* at www.youtube.com/watch?v=20rs9foyk28.



Figure 8. Jonas Dassler and Vidina Popov in a two-dimensional painted cardboard bed. Alles Schwindel, Gorki Theater, 2017. (Photo by Iko Freese / www.drama-berlin.de)

Frau Luna was a box office hit and ran for three consecutive seasons between October 2016 and March 2019, racking up 147 performances (Wenger 2021)—more than all three successful Kosky-Manzel-Benzwi operettas combined. This demonstrated that it is possible, all these years after the Nazis destroyed Germany’s commercial entertainment industry, to attract an audience with operetta at a privately owned venue like Tipi am Kanzleramt, outside of the state-subsidized circuit. It also proved that there is a remarkable group of alternative operetta performers beyond Manzel, Mehrling, and Hopp. Gunda Bartels wrote enthusiastically in *Tagesspiegel*: “Tipi am Kanzleramt confirmed [with this production] that it is an entertainment stage of note, managing to fuse the virtues of U and E [*Unterhaltung* and *Ernste Kunst*, entertainment and serious art] into a unique art form—with glossiness, trashy glitter, and all that zipp-zapp” (Bartels 2016).

While Mottl reimagined the 1970s TV aesthetic oozing with optimism for *Frau Luna*, Christian Weise at the Gorki evoked the dark and damaged world of Otto Dix and George Grosz with his *Alles Schwindel*, a *Burleske in 8 Bildern* (Burlesque in Eight Tableaus) with a libretto by Marcellus Schiffer, originally written in 1931 for Gustaf Gründgens and Margo Lion. Weise, who in 2016 staged a queered, all-male *Othello* at the Gorki, went for the grotesque exaggeration of bodies (in fat suits), faces (in glaring Expressionist makeup with silent movie-type dark eyeliner and deathly white mascara), projections of artificial landscapes that changed with a loud click of the projector, and a reduction of props and sets to flat black-and-white cartoon drawings. The production questions the trustworthiness of reality and mocks everything—i.e., the entire onstage world—as a swindle. At one point an actor, carrying off an entire piece of the set, says the added line: “This isn’t two-dimensional, this is genius!” Actors repeatedly step out of their costumes and show that underneath is another character, and yet another, often of another gender, to the point where nothing is certain. An actor playing a “gay tree” and a “gay traffic light”—and costumed as such—as a self-parodying LGBTQ element



Figure 9. (From left) Jonas Dassler as Tonio Hendricks and Vidina Popov as Evelyne Hill, with Oscar Olivia in Christian Weise's production of *Alles Schwindel*. Gorki Theater, 2017. (Photo by Iko Freese / www.drama-berlin.de)

reintroduces himself, over and over, in English, with “Hi, my name is Oscar and I’m gay.” Many characters also address the audience directly, claiming to be the actors themselves, calling each other by their “real” names and offering personal stories, which then turn out to be fake — yet another swindle.²³

Showing everything onstage as fiction to be remade at any moment takes queer deconstruction to a more radical level, far beyond Kosky's. Weise's queer reading of operetta, which also tackles racism, feminism, colonialism, anti-Semitism, white privilege, and the abuse of power, might be typical for the Gorki, but in the context of operetta performance history, it's nothing short of an earthquake. The result proved surprisingly successful with the Gorki audience, “today's Berlin hipsters” as Derek Scally calls them, an audience not otherwise associated with operetta. They were “howling with delight” at the similarities between this “panopticon of Weimar Berlin life” and their own lives (Scally 2018).

Operetta fans from outside the company's core audience soon ventured to *Alles Schwindel* to expand their understanding of the genre with a show that was queer *and* critical *and* hugely entertaining, and even had English supertitles for non-German visitors. The genre-bending music was arranged and played by Jens Dohle and a small band onstage. Instead of the originally planned limited winter holiday season run, *Alles Schwindel* went into repertoire and was presented at least once a month until 2020, alternating with the other highly political productions for which the Gorki has become famous. Simultaneously, the film career of leading man Jonas Dassler skyrocketed, which in turn brought in yet another audience eager to see their idol.

23. See the trailer for *Alles Schwindel* at the Gorki at www.youtube.com/watch?v=2es7QRvN6CM.



Figure 10. Tansel Akzeybek in the role of the spy, Ito (played by Richard Tauber in 1933) and Vera-Lotte Boecker as his soprano love interest, Lydia, surrounded by dancers in Barrie Kosky's production of *Frühlingsstürme*. Komische Oper Berlin, 2020. (Photo by Iko Freese / www.drama-berlin.de)

Babylon and Beyond

The revival of the mostly Weimar operettas went hand in hand with a renewed worldwide interest in the Weimar Republic, including a 2022 Otto Dix exhibition in Stuttgart, a revival of *Cabaret* in the West End in December 2021, and a 2022 musical in New York based on the German singing group Comedian Harmonists. Remarkably, the newly discovered shows and music were immediately recycled: a hit song from *Alles Schwindel* ended up in season two of the internationally acclaimed TV series *Babylon Berlin*.²⁴

The new awareness that the entertainment world of the 1920s is an integral part of German history was also evident in a major exhibition devoted to the German Revolution of 1918–19 at Museum für Fotografie in 2018, *Berlin in der Revolution 1918/1919*. There, photos of street fights were hung side by side with posters of Erik Charell ballets, operettas with Fritzi Massary, revues with a song about “Die Wohnungsnot” (housing shortage), and a “Fox Macabre” by the young Friedrich Hollaender. While the Museum für Fotografie exhibition examined the end of World War I and the founding of the first German democracy, the earlier 2014 exhibition *Mein Kamerad – die Diva* (My Comrade – the Diva) looked at the start of the Great War with “Theater an der Front und in Gefangenenlagern des Ersten Weltkrieg” (Theatre at the front lines of war and in prisoner of war camps in World War I). The *Kamerad* exhibition included a staggering number of photos of operettas performed by cross-dressed prisoners of war. The historic images

24. See a clip from *Babylon Berlin* at www.youtube.com/watch?v=3efrnSop7ko.

of gender-bending soldiers (triggering homoerotic longing among comrades; see Köhne, Lange, and Vetter 2014) seem to foreshadow the queer operetta revolution a century later.

The visibility and inclusion of such aspects in theatre, musical theatre, and German historical research indicates that a substantial shift occurred during the 2010s in Germany as operetta reentered a wider arena of popular debate on Nazis, Weimar, exile, the holocaust, etc., that in the past left out anything to do with the entertainment industry. The decade of the 2020s began with Kosky's last pre-Covid operetta premiere: Jaromir Weinberger's espionage thriller *Frühlingsstürme* (Spring Storms) originally written for stage, film, and recording superstar Richard Tauber, set during the Russo-Japanese War and heralded as "the last operetta of the Weimar Republic"—it ran from 20 January to 12 March 1933.²⁵

In contrast to his previous operetta enterprises, Kosky presented the Weinberger with a standard in-house opera cast that offered no thrills à la Manzel or Dassler (or Tauber), and surprisingly there were hardly any queer elements. Perhaps Kosky felt that his trademark queer revolution was outdated, or perhaps he wanted to prove he could do something without his congenial *aides de camp* Manzel and Benzwi. Sadly, this unqueer *Frühlingsstürme* was a lackluster affair whose impact was cut short by Covid and the closure of all theatres in Berlin. Yet it was this conventional production, filmed in January 2020, that found its way onto DVD and was released by Naxos. Perhaps Naxos decided lovers of classical music and operetta elsewhere in the world would buy this more traditional version (the DVD has subtitles in German, English, French, Japanese, and Korean).

Reviewing *Frühlingsstürme* with muted enthusiasm, the *New York Times* used the "last operetta" claim as its headline and still gave it considerable attention. Even if critic Joshua Barone wasn't sure whether "on balance" the Weinberger piece is "an entirely successful show," he was jubilant about the general renaissance of operettas from the 1920s and early 1930s, saying that Kosky is its "patron saint." Barone even claims that these rediscoveries "will go down as the defining project of [Kosky's] tenure at the Komische Oper." Barone points out to US American readers that operettas from the Weimar years—in comparison with Broadway operettas by Sigmund Romberg, Rudolf Friml, Victor Herbert, or their better-known Viennese predecessors—were "more urban" and "subversive politically, sexually and racially. They were also a commercial art form, much like Broadway" (Barone 2020). The *Times'* approval suggests that the queer rebranding of the genre has been provisionally accomplished, even if the most recent large-scale operetta production in New York was a *Merry Widow* at the Metropolitan Opera with diva Renée Fleming presenting the genre as a dusty nostalgia affair in a standard-issue, pre-Kosky way. Nonetheless this unanimous international applause for Kosky's achievements brings this "Made in Berlin" operetta big bang to an ending of sorts—while simultaneously serving as a jumping off point for the next generation of directors and performers.

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25. See the trailer for *Frühlingsstürme* at www.youtube.com/watch?v=sw1GHpA2B8Q.

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