Ludwig F. Lafrentz and the German Theater in Texas: A Participant's Reminiscences

Christa Carvajal
Annelise Duncan

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ethj
Part of the United States History Commons
Tell us how this article helped you.

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ethj/vol21/iss1/8
LUDWIG F. LAFRENTZ AND THE GERMAN THEATER IN TEXAS: A PARTICIPANT'S REMINISCENCES

by Christa Carvajal and Annelise Duncan

The records of theater productions staged by German Texans throughout much of the nineteenth century are widely scattered and incomplete. No theater collection exists in Texas that includes even a marginally representative variety of written sources, such as prompt books, directors' notebooks, and theatrical artifacts from which the historian of German ethnic theater could derive a fairly complete account.

To the still-fragmentary picture of German language theater in Texas, the recollections of Ludwig F. Lafrentz in Deutsch-Texanische Monatshefte add an important new piece. Recently rediscovered, the memoirs substantiate certain conclusions of earlier historical studies, verify important production dates and names of participating artists, and offer a better perspective of the goals and actual accomplishments of German artistic efforts. As the only detailed commentary on specific productions in Texas by a contemporary German amateur actor and director, the memoirs provide much needed insight into the practices of German theater artists and, additionally, the state of frontier theater in the middle decades of the last century.

Chroniclers of Texan cultures have repeatedly pointed out that the widespread theatrical activities of German Texans contributed measurably to the aesthetic climate of the Lone Star State. Against this claim, Lafrentz' recollections assume considerable significance, contributing to an understanding of that tradition which instilled in German Texans a cultural high-mindedness and theater sophistication supposedly superior to that of other ethnic groups.

Lafrentz notes that, in 1857, producing German theater clubs existed not only in Fredericksburg, New Braunfels, and San Antonio, but also in Yorktown, Austin, LaGrange, Bastrop, and other smaller German communities. This information is verified by other sources. A reference in Fredericksburg, Texas: The First Fifty Years establishes an amateur theater society in Fredericksburg as perhaps the earliest regularly producing German troupe in Texas. In 1850, this society built "a small but neat stage... in the Nimitz Hotel, and the artist Lungkwitz from Austin painted beautiful movable scenes."

German ethnic theater in Texas began with the staging of the first part of the Wallenstein trilogy, Wallenstein's Lager, by Friedrich von Schiller, one of Germany's greatest playwrights. The conflict between the ambitious selection of a first-rate literary piece and the limited pro-

Christa Carvajal teaches in the Drama Department, and Annelise Duncan is in the Department of Foreign Languages at the University of Georgia.
duction resources created a problem even in this early effort that charac-
terized most subsequent German-American theater activities in Texas
and elsewhere."

According to the chronicle of Fredericksburg’s first fifty years, an
ambitious theater effort at times resulted in unpredictable audience
responses. On the occasion of a *Tannhauser* production, Mr. Frank
van der Stucken had to play the part of a countess for lack of female
actresses. The records state clearly that the audience “almost died
laughing."

Lafrentz’ memoirs attempt a justification of German literary thea-
er ambitions on the Texas frontier, the lack of artists to execute
difficult choices notwithstanding. He writes:

I have often heard the argument that an amateur theater
should not attempt to produce the classic drama. Where a
professional theater exists, I can accept that argument, but in
the circumstances of frontier Texas . . . I must emphatically
object to that proposition. I look upon theater not just as
entertainment but, instead, as an educational institution for
the benefit of participants as well as audiences. To accom­
plish that purpose, one has to reach always a little higher
than the resources justify and the audience’s taste demands."

Other German directors apparently agreed with Lafrentz who
reports in his memoirs that

When, on November 10, 1859, Schiller’s one-hundredth birth­
day was celebrated . . . *Die Braut von Messina* was presented
in Yorktown. In LaGrange, Lambe’s play *Die Karlsschuler*,
treating an episode in the life of Schiller, was staged . . . A
scene from *Don Carlos* (with Dr. Th. Herzberg as Philipp and
Wm. Schunke as Pasa), and the scene between Stauffacher
and his wife from *Wilhelm Tell* were staged in San Antonio.
Presented in New Braunfels were the big forest scene from the
second act of *Die Rauber* with C. Riefkohl as ‘Carl Moor’
and Hermann Seele as ‘Pater,’ and the Parricides [sic] scene
from the fifth act of *Wilhelm Tell*."

One of the most interesting passages of Lafrentz’ memoirs describes
in some detail a production of Schiller’s *Wilhelm Tell*, staged in 1869
in Bastrop. Well aware of the problem of casting this drama with a
great number of characters, the director Lafrentz describes how he
attempted to do justice to Schiller and *Wilhelm Tell*:

I went about my task [of adaptation] as faithfully as possible.
With real regret, I had to cut out the appearance of the
Attinghausen family, including Bertha of Bruneck, as well as
the first scenes of act one. I began [the play] with the scene
in Walter Furst’s house, during which the previous events
(Baumgarten’s flight, the banning of Zwing Uri, etc.) are told.
Then the ‘Rutt’ scene followed as second act. Since we could
not do a scene change in the open, we were forced to play
[the drama] in eight acts which included: act three—in front of Tell’s house; act four—the target; act five—at the Vierz­waldstatter lake; act six—the passage at Kussnacht; act seven—market place in Altdorf; act eight—in Tell’s house."

According to Lafrentz, there was considerable opposition from members of the German community to the staging of Schiller’s idealistic drama in Bastrop by a local amateur troupe. Cries of “sacrilege” ceased, however, after opening night. “The audience,” writes Lafrentz, “enjoyed ... more true German poetry than [it could have] in a hun­dred plays of the old or new Kotzebue genre.”

The opposition was represented in full force and, as usual, was silenced by the success [of our production]. Now the loudest opponents were the ones that could not praise us enough.

With considerable humor, Lafrentz keeps reminding his readers that during the first decades after the Germans’ arrival in the 1840s, Texas was not a part of the United States that attracted many profes­sional theater troupes. Until railroads finally connected San Antonio with the rest of the world, this city, “was probably considered to have been situated on the very border of civilization and barbarian territ­ory.” To immigrant Germans it looked very much like a place invented by a novelist “who was trying to have a somewhat believable background for a totally unbelievable story.” Within this environment, theater often seemed to happen in the city’s very streets which were peopled “by Indians, phantastically adorned Mexicans, desperados who were armed to their teeth, cowboys and other figures straight out of fairy-tales.”

Understandably, [in these circumstances] a professional the­ater was something one had to do without. Whatever the artistic efforts that could be mustered, they had to come from local dilettantes; but those who ... gave their time, their talent and often their money as well, certainly did not have to be ashamed. Generally, a good fare was produced, which was often better than [just] good.

The “better than just good” theater fare of the 1850s, 1860s, and 1870s in San Antonio was usually produced by the Casino Verein. Founded in 1854, the Casino Association saw as its primary goal the promotion and preservation of German culture and tradition. Only four years after its founding, members of the Association succeeded in the building of San Antonio’s first opera house. And ... here, under the management of Mr. C. Listich, [theater] developed into a true art institution, whose amateur produc­tions must be considered models of their kind ... With lead­ing men such as W. Schunke, H. Karber, F. Wild, Carl von Iwonski, W. C. A. Thielepape and others, and leading ladies such as Ida Karber, Pentenneder and others it was not surpris­ing that good [theater] was indeed accomplished.”
According to Lafrentz, it was at the Casino theater, in 1872, that the well-known German-American actress, Methna Scheller, appeared as Philippine Welfer and Preciosa, also starring in *Kabale und Liebe* and *Von Stufe zu Stufe.* At this time, there were also two other German organizations that produced plays, namely the *Arbeiterverein,* and the *Vergnugungsverein "Harmonie."* Neither association, however, could or did compete with the Casino Association.

It becomes quite obvious from Lafrentz' memoirs that, generally, German regional theater troupes produced a great deal of conventional melodramatic theater fare which catered to the tastes of nineteenth century audiences, Schiller productions for special commemorative occasions notwithstanding. Even the melodrama, however, presented the untrained German troupes with considerable production-related challenges.

Especially the immigrant generation had among them many educated individuals with theatrical knowledge. They became the directors, designers, and actors who attempted to follow as closely as circumstances permitted the professional theater, well remembered from Germany, where it was an important cultural institution for a large segment of society. German theater, therefore, was neither naive nor ritualistic but, instead, *burgerlich,* imitative, and nostalgic, as Lafrentz' memoirs point our repeatedly.

Among his reminiscences, Lafrentz recounts the tale of a founder's day celebration in New Braunfels which took place while he himself was in Bastrop. The theatrical society had reorganized after the Civil War and, a year or two later, felt that a celebration was in order. No matter the actual founding date, a founder's day was a good excuse for some lighthearted merriment after the cheerless war years.

The theatrical society was able to look back upon a period of success. The performances had been well attended and well received. The society had afforded the New Braunfels public many an enjoyable evening while providing two new class-rooms for the school. Sufficient reasons to justify a founder's day celebration.

Since the public had been instrumental in the success of the theater, the society's plans for the festivities included its loyal audience.

A one-act play by Gorner, *Schwarzer Peter,* provided the dramatic portion of the program, with a visiting young lady from San Antonio cast as the female lead while Mr. Sch., formerly a member of the New Braunfels society but now of San Antonio, had promised to be on hand to play the part of the old forester. This left the New Braunfels actors free to enjoy themselves to their hearts' content. The performance was to be followed by a banquet and the banquet by the inevitable ball.
The eve of the celebration was spent cooking and baking for over a hundred invited guests and preparing the hall of the singing society to receive them. The day began bright and sunny but

Not the least bit of confidence can be placed in Texas weather, and the weather clerk seems to look upon festivities with a very special malice... founder's day was no exception to the rule. Around 10 o'clock in the morning a heavy thunderstorm disgorged a cloudburst turning the prairie in the southern part of town and the road to the hall into a lake almost impassable on foot.

The committee met quickly and decided not to postpone the festivities. Since there was no ice in those days, the perishable foods, already prepared, were a major consideration. Committee members dispersed throughout the town in search of all available vehicles, not an easy task because not many families owned carriages. Eventually, enough were secured to transport the ladies. The men took off shoes and socks and waded to the hall. Despite this inconvenience, all the guests were in good spirits as they waited for the arrival of Mr. Sch. and the beginning of the play. When the actor did not appear, living pictures were improvised to the delight of the audience. The dance following the excellent banquet lasted until daylight. The eventual arrival of Mr. Sch., who had been delayed by impassable roads, inspired the committee to continue the celebration that evening by staging the Schwarze Peter after all. Lafrentz concludes his story with the observation that while the weather created obstacles, it could not prevent but only double a festive occasion for the enthusiastic New Braunfelsers of that day to commemorate their heritage.

In another reminiscence entitled “Traveling Artists,” Lafrentz comments on the state of theater in Texas as perceived by two self-proclaimed professional actors from the east. The setting for the episode was the Bastrop Casino-Theater which had continued to stage performances with more or less regularity, always inspired by a small group of art enthusiasts. It was a peaceful Sunday afternoon gathering of five Casino members that first received the news: a Mr. and Mrs. Genee had arrived, uninvited and unannounced, to give a concert! A prominent actress and a renowned dramatist by that name were well known but not related to the visitors who boasted of a glittering operatic career on all major stages of Europe and America. The pair claimed to have foregone the most attractive offers in order to bring true art to the “poor Texans.”

However, lamented Mrs. Genee, there is little appreciation for the arts here in Texas. I had envisioned it to be very different. The people here seem to prefer any popular song to the most beautiful arias of our classical operas. On top of that, a dilettante arrogance pre-
vails that is downright incredible. Just imagine, after a concert in a tiny village, a farmer quartet sang to my husband his main number, *In einem kühlen Grunde*, to show how it should be done. The howling made me quite ill.\^{14}

Lafrentz discovers later that the "terrible" incident had, indeed, taken place but that "howling" best described Mr. Genee's singing, not that of the quartet.

Mrs. Genee also commented on the hardships of travel in Texas, particularly by ox cart. However, once returned to their charming villa on the Hudson, she hoped to recover in time and be able to laugh at these Texas adventures. The villa, the not-so-gullible Casino members suspected, was probably a castle in the air, designed to impress.

The couple had high hopes for their appearance in Bastrop, and obliging Casino members tried to arouse interest in the community for the concert. Meanwhile, an "unspeakable" incident involving the couple's landlady reduced Mrs. Genee to tears, and only a concerted effort and move to different quarters persuaded her to stay for the performance. Attendance at the concert was so light that the proceeds did not cover the license fee; the public performance had to be cancelled and the money refunded. Instead, the Casino held a social evening for members only, not subject to licensing by the sheriff. The couple sang their program and were compensated through a voluntary collection. The quality of the rendition Lafrentz describes thus:

> I will not deny that the concert did not satisfy even us greatly who were ready to perceive the best in it and were not spoiled. Madame had a somewhat worn-out but still melodious and well-trained soprano voice but her husband proved that he had the pretentions but not the ability of an artist.\^{15}

He concludes with the hope that the "artist pair," departing as they had arrived, by ox cart, would find greener pastures elsewhere and would soon be able to recover from their Texas ordeal in their "villa on the Hudson."

Lafrentz concludes his memoirs with the admission that, once Texas became a state connected with the rest of the country by railroads, the theater enthusiasm of German Texans shifted to a wholehearted support of American traveling theater companies visiting the Lone Star State. He writes:

> Their repertory consisted of the best dramas in English literature and their productions were, in spite of inadequate stages and sets, generally good. *Herr Ernst Rische* [manager of the Casino Association facilities in San Antonio] made, soon after railroad connections were established, an agreement with the Casino and later with the *Turnverein* to book out-of-stage troupes for a regular theatrical season.\^{17}

Once English language theater flourished, the demand for theatrical offerings in German ceased. In Texas, as Lafrentz' memoirs point out,
the German community eventually replaced its own dramatic activities with loyal support of American productions, which offered what the German Texans had always cherished: lively theater.

NOTES

1Some prompt books and scripts of late nineteenth century German plays are part of the theater collection at the University of Texas at Austin. They have not yet been traced, however, to specific theaters or theater artists in Texas. Reviews of some German language productions can be found in various German language newspapers of which the Neu Braunfelser Zeitung in the collection of the Sophienburg Memorial Museum at New Braunfels seems to have been the most theater attentive.

The "Casino Club Papers" at the University of Texas at San Antonio include some financial records of productions in San Antonio. The growing theater collection of the San Antonio Public Library, initially gathered and presently being catalogued by John Igo of San Antonio College, includes a few programs and some artifacts of German language productions.

2The issues of Deutsch-Texanische Monatshefte containing Ludwig F. Lafrentz' theater recollections (in German) were found in the personal collection of the recently deceased Frederic Oheim of New Braunfels by James Patrick McGuire of the Institute of Texan Cultures who made them available to the authors of this paper.


7Carvajal, 35-38.

8Penniger, 35.

9Monatshefte, 5, No. 9 (1900), 141.

10Monatshefte, 5, No. 1 (1900), 13-14.

11Monatshefte, 5, No. 9 (1900), 141.

12Monatshefte, 5, No. 9 (1900), 142.

13Monatshefte, 5, No. 11 (1900), 165.

14Monatshefte, 5, No. 11 (1900), 165.

15Monatshefte, 5, No. 11 (1900), 165.

16Monatshefte, 5, No. 11 (1900), 165.

17Monatshefte, 5, No. 11 (1900), 165.

18Speiser, 21.

19Monatshefte, 5, No. 11 (1900), 165.

20Monatshefte, 5, No. 11 (1900), 166.

21Monatshefte, 5, No. 11 (1900), 166.

22Monatshefte, 5, No. 3 (1900), 44.

23Monatshefte, 5, No. 3 (1900), 44.

24Monatshefte, 5, No. 3 (1900), 44.

25Monatshefte, 5, No. 6 (1900), 92.

26Monatshefte, 5, No. 6 (1900), 93.

27Monatshefte, 5, No. 12 (1900), 186.