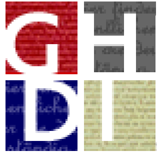

Volume 6. Weimar Germany, 1918/19–1933
Felix Gilbert on Berlin as the Cultural Capital (Retrospective Account, 1988)

Berlin was cultural capital of the Weimar Republic as well as the political one. Berlin's theatrical landscape made that more than clear: in 1927, the city's 49 theaters offered a total of 47,000 seats for spectators; additionally, in 1929, the city boasted more than 75 cabarets. The internationally sought-after director Max Reinhardt operated his own theaters, the "Reinhardt Stages" (above all, the Große Schauspielhaus [Great Theater], the Deutsche Theater [German Theater], and the *Kammerspiele*), where he oversaw both artistic and business matters alike. The theatrical work of Erwin Piscator and Bertolt Brecht had a stronger political accent and was more socially critical.

Most of all, however, Berlin was an intellectually exciting city. Its isolation from the outside world, first during the war and then during the years that followed, created a restless eagerness to catch up with what had been going on elsewhere, and to make Berlin a center of new movements in art, music, and literature. Berlin in the twenties was emphatically "international," and foreign visitors of distinction were eagerly welcomed. I heard Arnold Toynbee, Johan Huizinga, and Rabindranath Tagore speak at the university, and I remember seeing André Gide sitting in the center box at a commemorative celebration for Rilke. From the first half of the nineteenth century Berlin had always been a capital of musical life; I doubt, however, that its musical offerings had ever been as brilliant as they were in the twenties. Berlin had three large opera houses, all for the staging of serious operas, and one placed special emphasis on modern operas and experimental productions. Three outstanding conductors directed the orchestras at these operas and the Philharmonic concerts: Wilhelm Furtwängler, Bruno Walter, and Otto Klemperer. Although in later years I had some reservations about Furtwängler's interpretations, during these years his conducting of Beethoven's symphonies was unsurpassed and unsurpassable. The greatest concert I can remember was in the enormous, overcrowded Philharmonic Hall, with Casals sitting very small and lonely on the immense stage playing nothing but Bach for the entire evening.

Yet Berlin's best offerings during these years were the theater performances; and they were the chief topic of many conversations. During the winters no week passed without my going at least once to the theater. When at the end of the month my budget was exhausted and I could not afford a seat, it was "standing room." I doubt that any city has ever had as many theaters playing simultaneously as Berlin did in the 1920s. There were three state theaters, four theaters under the direction of Max Reinhardt, a similar number under Victor Barnowsky, and many other theaters for serious plays and social comedies.

In reminiscing about the Berlin theater of these years, I must begin with the name of an actress about whom all Berlin was crazy, and I no less than anyone else: Elizabeth Bergner. I believe I saw her in every play in which she appeared during these years, even in a role in which she appeared no more than four or five times because the production—*La Dame aux Camélias*—was a failure. Elizabeth Bergner was not only the graceful and charming heroine of Shakespeare's comedies, or the childlike *Joan of Arc* of Shaw, but a great interpreter of difficult psychological roles such as those in Strindberg's tragedies or O'Neill's *Strange Interlude*. However, Elisabeth Bergner was not the only great actress on the Berlin stage in the 1920's. The list reaches from Maria Orska in Frank Wedekind's plays, full of sex without passion, from Tilla Durieux in Shaw's *Pygmalion*, from Helene Thimig as an Austrian aristocrat in Hofmannsthal's *Der Schwierige*, to Marlene Dietrich stepping down a broad staircase in tuxedo and top hat. However, if the acting was admirable, the manner of production was no less a cause of excitement. Max Reinhardt was *the* great producer of the time, and in his gigantic playhouse—a circus transformed into a theater—he staged, one evening a serious, strictly stylized *Oedipus*, and another evening Offenbach's comic opera *Orpheus in the Underworld*, bubbling with contemporary allusions. Other producers dared to present Shakespeare or Schiller in stark, bare settings and costumes, so that all attention would be directed to the words, their content and meaning. In consequence, we added to the canon of classics our own classics: Heinrich von Kleist's *Penthesilea* and Georg Büchner's *Danton's Death.*

The theater in Berlin was profoundly exciting not only because it was frequently great art, but also because it was intensely political. It was no longer an expressionist outcry against all social conventions, which it had been immediately after the revolution of 1917, but it was still a manifestation against old traditions, a place for social criticism and for denouncing restrictions of freedom. Not only did modern plays—those by Ernst Toller, Georg Kaiser, and Carl Zuckmayer, the most admired of the young poets—serve these purposes, but so did older plays like Schiller's *Don Carlos* and Hauptmann's *Weber*. Brilliantly produced and acted, these suddenly seemed to be written for our time and for us. The greatest and most unforgettable production, however, in which art and politics was beautifully combined, was Brecht and Weill's *Threepenny Opera*, which played before full houses for years and which I must have seen three or four times. It gave a grim, hopeless picture of a world in which corruption controlled human life and society. Yet it had a fairy-tale ending: the mounted messenger of the king arrives at the last moment, saving the hero from execution.

In my description of Berlin in the twenties I have given a picture of the life, or at least of the thinking, of people who felt more and more the approach of an evil power, and the unavoidability of the collapse of the world in which they had set their hopes. What is misleading is this, and what I have been unable to depict, is that whatever we rationally thought about the future, we never gave up hope that the mounted messenger of the king would arrive.

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