

Chapter 6. ‘A happy man can live in the past’—musical theatre transfer in the 1920s and 1930s

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Musical theatre and the First World War

The war produced a temporary end to the transfer of plays and performers between London and Berlin, although in the case of the latter the appetite for West End musical comedies dried up even before the outbreak of hostilities with the 1912 production of *Schwindelmeier & Co.* In London German operettas remained popular for longer with a few such shows surviving into wartime London, even more heavily disguised than usual to the extent that ‘Viennese’ names were ‘left out of the programmes’, but apparently continuing to register to the trained ear in the familiar racialised terms. In the case of *Mam’sell Tralala* (1914) masquerading at the Lyric as *Oh, Be Careful*, ‘remnants...of the tuneful Viennese original (by Jean Gilbert, alias Max Winterfeld of Hamburg) were easy to hear’—although there was little that was Viennese about this Berlin produced show.¹ Another production adapted from a Gilbert show, *The Girl in the Taxi*, was revived at the Garrick in 1915, and ‘after several changes of West End home aggregated 165 performances’.²

These were exceptions, however, suggestive of commercial cultures continuing to take risks in a new, uncertain wartime context. For the most part, German operettas simply could not be staged in Britain and had to be cancelled, leaving some producers badly caught out. In *I Was An Actor Once*, Robert Courtneidge explained how,

in the spring of 1914, as I had not a play ready, Edwardes transferred to me his rights in *Kino Königin*, a German play with music by Jean Gilbert. I went to

New York where a translation was being played, but, not caring for it, drafted out a new version of the story on the voyage back, and, with Hulbert to help, we produced *The Cinema Star* with great success at the Shaftesbury...The play promised to be one of the most successful I had produced, and I looked forward with confidence to the future when the outbreak of the Great War ruined all my hopes. The German origin of *The Cinema Star* was fatal.³

Puppchen (1912) was a further example of this kind. Edwardes bought the rights for the show for £1000 in advance, but was forced to postpone any plans for production with the outbreak of war, in part because he was interned at Nauheim in 1914, but also because, quite apart from anything else, the show's popular march tune ('Puppchen, du bist mein Augensterne') had quickly become a German troop song.

The war brought further changes to musical theatre in Britain and Germany. After a brief period of complete closure, theatres in both sites reopened. In the early days of hostilities, inward-looking patriotism became the new fashion. Jingoistic revues, like *Business as Usual* at the Hippodrome, *Kam'rad Männe* at the Thalia-Theater, *Immer feste druff* at the Berliner, *Odds and Ends* at the Ambassadors, *Woran wir denken* at the Metropol and a string of others all opening in 1914 became the standard fare. As Martin Baumeister has shown, however, audiences soon tired of this kind of show, especially after it became clear that the war would not be over in a matter of weeks, as many had predicted.⁴ Musical theatres, again in both cities, reverted to more traditional, romantic and sentimental fare. With the odd exception—*The Better 'Ole* (1917), for example, which, uniquely for a West End musical of this time, was set at the front—entertainment distracted by being removed from the war zone and was expected to operate as 'a good sound tonic'.⁵ It often took the form of diverting and exotic spectaculars set in far away places. The Dalys's spectacular

productions of *The Maid of the Mountains* (1917) and *A Southern Maid* (1917) were symptomatic here, as was the pantomime orientalism of *Chu Chin Chow* (1917), a classic piece of wartime escapism. Where modern styling prevailed, it often figured in Americanised versions or as musical farce—in shows like *The Boy* (1917), *Kissing Time* (1919), *Theodore and Co.* (1916) and *Who's Hooper* (1919), all of which were good-time shows with relatively little local engagement, especially at the political level.

In the Berlin counterpart, a distinctly nostalgic operetta almost entirely displaced the fashion for contemporaneity previously evident in operettas and pre-war revues. The latter fell into sharp decline, both at the Metropol and elsewhere. Fritzi Massary, once a star of Schulz's famous pre-war revues, continued to reign supreme, but under a very different regime now characterised by the huge success of such shows as Fall's *Die Kaiserin* (1915), Offenbach's *Grande-Duchess* (1916), Kálmán's *Die Csárdásfürstin* (1915) and the immensely popular *Rose von Stamboul* (1916), also by Fall. Even composers usually considered modernisers of operetta returned to more traditional forms—retrospective and nostalgic—and, in a dynamic that continued well after hostilities had ceased, Berlin became a focal point for this development. Lehár shows typically premiered in Berlin, which by the early 1920s was even more appreciative of 'this romantic fare' than Vienna, an orientation either glossed over or ignored in cultural histories focused on the more risqué nightlife entertainments of the Weimar Republic. Lehár's younger successors and fellow countrymen, Oscar Strauss and Leo Fall, studied music in Berlin for some time, where many of their later successes premiered before being staged in Vienna. In the 1920s and beyond, alongside the infamous avant-gardism and nude stages, a much more sedate Berlin operetta continued to flourish as the staple of popular musical theatre. If 'the left, the

intellectuals and the cabaret crowd' mocked it, 'middle-of-the road and lowbrow tastes' embraced the return to an aristocratic prettification of the nineteenth century.⁶ Indeed, operetta was creating a new traditionalist school, of which Berlin was becoming the principal exponent.

There is a sense, then, in which commercial musical theatres in London and Berlin, for all the appearance of being at war, responded in parallel ways. The operetta so popular in Germany may have produced a national and racial identification that rendered it unthinkable for London audiences in wartime, just as the identification between a now somewhat outmoded musical comedy and Englishness rendered the former impossible for Berlin. At the same time, London revue continued to develop in edgy ways, with elements of fatalism, dark tones, sharp satire and wild juxtaposition. That aside however, popular musical theatre in both Berlin and London was in fact responding similarly, retreating to safer ground, not least by displacing the social engagement and energetic optimism of an earlier musical theatre culture with escapism and fantasy of another order.

'From Austria'—post-war rapprochement

Producers were wary about reintroducing German-style musical theatre into the West End after the war. While British stages were closed to the likes of Lehár, Fall and Kálmán, their operettas had 'ragged in Vienna and Berlin', as popular diversion certainly but also as manifestations of popular national taste and style.⁷ Indeed, operetta was so closely identified with conservative notions of Germany between the wars that it later became one of the versions of popular musical entertainment most sponsored and celebrated by National Socialism—once it was 'cleansed' of Jewish personnel. Lehár's works, for example, were continually performed under the Third

Reich, and Lehár accepted awards such as ‘the Ring of Honour and Hitler’s Goethe-Medallion’.⁸

It was similarly because of the potential identifications with race and nation that the re-emergence of operetta in the West End became such an important signifier of rapprochement. In April 1920 the producer Albert De Courville wrote a carefully composed letter to the *Times* asking who would be ‘the first manager to take the plunge and return to the conditions prevailing in pre-war days’. Eager to reassure that he would not be taking on this responsibility personally, De Courville went on to point out some of the anomalies of the continuing embargo. He was hearing, he wrote, ‘reports daily of the production of brilliant musical plays in Berlin, Vienna and other cities of the Central States’. Other rumours were in circulation. ‘Franz Lehár has, I understand, lately written a comic opera generally admitted to be better than even his *Merry Widow*, and other “enemy” composers—some quite unknown—are also said to be doing brilliant work’. There were signs, De Courville continued, of a shift in public attitudes. At ‘a recent concert in London...a few members of the audience who were hostile to German music were shouted down by an overwhelming majority’. De Courville pointed to the paradox of the ‘undiminished enthusiasm of English audiences for Wagnerian opera’ and posed the central question frankly:

Are we still at war with Germany or not? America evidently thinks not. I am told that Lehár is going over and Reinhardt has been invited. Are we in the theatrical world free to buy plays from the late enemy in the same way as we buy razors? Are we at liberty to reawaken public interest in a class of show highly delectable before the war? And in what manner should the movement be begun? Will it be a gradual process, starting with a production of a Lithuanian show, followed by one from Czecho-Slovakia, and proceeding to a Hungarian and

thence to a purely Teutonic production? Perhaps this will be the solution of the difficulty.⁹

In the event, De Courville was not far wrong. The return of Berlin operetta to the London stage in the early twenties was characterised by advanced forms of amelioration and subterfuge, in some ways suggestive of the kind of creeping Germanicisation half-jokingly visualised by the West End producer. As had been the case in the pre-War years, only now more so, these 1920s exports, especially to Britain, remained contingent on elaborate disguise. Künneke's *Der Vetter aus Dingsda* (*The Cousin from Nowhere*, 1923), for example, a Berlin show in most material respects, was presented in London not as a German show but as 'Continental', written by 'Continental writers and a Continental composer'.¹⁰ Other musical plays were internationalised. *Wenn Liebe erwacht* (*Love's Awakening*, 1922) became 'an Italian story...set to music by a German....[with] the chief male role [being] acted by a Turk'.¹¹ The designation 'from Austria' became an especially important product marker for the new transfer market, for obvious reasons. The central priority was to establish distance between the shows and modern industrial Germany, still the new power in central Europe, although now struggling under the severe constraints of post-war treaties. Through association with the 'golden age' of Strauss, the Austrian tag associated Berlin operetta with romantic escapism and invoked a more neutral, much less threatening version of Germany. Reduced from its once vast territories to the much smaller Alpine state we know today, Austria in its stage version could be rendered palatable to British theatregoers. Thus Jean Gilbert's show *Die Frau im Hermelin* (*The Lady of the Rose*) was adapted in 1922 not from German but 'from the Austrian by Mr Frederick Lonsdale'.¹² Leo Fall's *Madam Pompadour*, first performed at the Berliner Theater in 1922, became a 'Viennese

musical comedy' at Daly's.¹³ Articles on 'The Berlin Stage', at one time regular features in *The Stage Year Book*, were displaced by articles on 'The Vienna Stage' which made reference to such figures as Max Reinhardt and all the operetta writers now established in Berlin as being 'Viennese'. In this way the very existence of Berlin as a theatre site was substantially disguised.¹⁴

Through such strategies, West End producers and the theatre press made post-war German operettas acceptable to British tastes. What made them hugely popular, however, was another question, one ultimately connected to the particular narratologies and the compositional, performance and production styles deployed in these musicals. In all these respects and more, the post-war shows were typically 'conservative'. They may have emanated from the modern, industrial capital that was now the primary producer and exporter of operettas as well as the base for its key composers and writers, but Berlin operettas were in other respects emphatically indifferent to most versions of modernity. However much it may have implicated Germany as a product, 1920s and 30s operetta stood well clear of collapsing economic conditions and the ideological conflicts of the 1920s and 30s. It operated most typically as an ersatz fantasy, a romantic symbol of 'the *fin-de-siècle*, pre-World War era', representing a mythical historical age—'with its uniforms, its balls, its political intrigue, and its intoxicating glamour', which had strong appeal in the wider world.¹⁵ In much the same way that, say, the American Western became a global commodity signifying 'universal' values in the 1950s and 60s, so these musicals that became so much established as 'Austrian' in the volatile period between the wars became a brand of much wider range. As De Courville insisted, this return to mythical aristocratic culture represented something 'delectable' at a time of conflict and

upheaval, a sumptuous and comforting indulgence in a daydream of glamour and order.

The new transfer market

Under these conditions, musical theatre exchange did eventually restart in the early 1920s, but with very clear divergences from the pre-war period. In the first place, although musicals returned to the transfer market, they now travelled almost exclusively in one direction of the London-Berlin axis.¹⁶ Although demand for ‘German’ operetta, on the ascendancy just before the War, was very much restored, West End musical comedies were no longer exportable to Berlin, and they vanished completely from Broadway—the all-important Empire networks were also breaking up. This decline reflected post-war conditions. The jubilant embracing of contemporaneity as ‘gaiety’, so much the stock-in-trade of West End musical comedies and German operettas, was no longer viable. The war had rendered their particular variety of naïve and cheerful optimism in face of the modern world obsolete, not to say tasteless. At the same time, the musical was becoming more strongly identified with the stylish and sophisticated innovations of an American stage now strongly competing for authority. Under these circumstances, the traditional West End product became more insular. It persevered with a now outmoded version of things right through to 1939, when a show like *Me and My Girl* could still attract large domestic audiences and became the curious exception that proved the rule. Just one West End musical comedy, *Mr Cinders*, an inversion of the Cinderella fairy tale with the gender roles reversed, eventually did make it to Berlin, in 1929. But there was nothing like the popularity and authority enjoyed from the mid 1890s to around 1912. Other forms of West End musical theatre, notably revue, may have flourished in the

1920s, but these did not penetrate the overseas market in the same way as early musical comedy had. Even the so-called intimate revues, devised by such figures as Noel Coward and Ronald Jeans and exported to Broadway, were so much rooted in the local that they were often perceived to be untranslatable in Continental terms.

Second, the shows in this new wave of operetta were not the same products as they once had been. While pre-war Berlin musical theatre shared with the West End a distinctly modern stylisation, its postwar production, for the most part, returned to the securities of more conventional ‘Viennese’ forms, including recitative, with shows such as *Die Frau im Hermelin* (*The Lady of the Rose*, 1922), *Wenn Liebe erwacht* (*Love’s Awakening*, 1920), *Madame Pompadour* (1922), *Das Land des Lächelns* (*The Land of Smiles*, 1929) and *Die Dubarry* (*The Dubarry*, 1931), all of which made successful transferences to the West End. Here, the once-characteristic mix of localism and cosmopolitanism firmly positioned in terms of a confident negotiation of the modern gave way to spectacles of a different kind—historical romances, like *Madame Pompadour* and *Die Dubarry*, both of which were set in pre-revolutionary France, or else, like Lehár’s *Die Blaue Mazur* (1920)—which played London in 1927 as *The Blue Mazurka*—and *Wenn Liebe erwacht*, they existed in mythic no time and fairy tale no place. Contemporary complexities were displaced by a return to the safeties and securities of aristocratic order, traditional romance and waltzes—the standard components of a ‘Viennese’ musical theatre now being virtually mass produced in Berlin, the new centre for this kind of product and the principal exporter of operetta after the First World War.

Play after play in this period followed the same design, back-peddalling into less controversial territory after an initial nod to the contemporary condition. *Die Frau im Hermelin*, for example, notionally a historical musical, nevertheless pointed to

potential contemporary conflict. Produced just a few years after real European revolution, it was set in the days of *Risorgimento*. Within a few pages, however, the show became a romantic Gothic romance, its terms of reference shifting from dissent and revolution to the more domestic domain of a lady's 'honour'. *Der Vetter aus Dingsda*, on the other hand, began with contemporary dialogue and potential conflict between age and youth. But what starts as the modern story of a young woman coming of age and exerting authority over her guardian quickly shifts gears when a modern house is transformed into 'a castle in 'Faeryland/As in the tales of the days that have been'. Here the 'real' 1920s and the notoriously unstable flapper identity are ceremoniously seen off to make way for the return of a traditionalist cousin singing 'a yodelling song'.¹⁷ The 1932 version of the Oscar Strauss show *Eine Frau, die weiß, was sie will*, produced at the Gaiety in 1933 as *Mother of Pearl*, worked in a similar narratological way. Again, the show initially registered as ultra-modern, with Pearl representing the modern girl against the backdrop of her father's old-fashioned conservatism. The show opens with her invoking the likes of contemporary iconoclasts like D.H. Lawrence and Aldous Huxley and singing a song entitled 'We Girls of Today', which ends with the line 'Thank God for the modern girl'. Ultimately, however, *Mother of Pearl* is an attack on modern women, 'selfish, shallow, extravagant, obstinate, vain', with Pearl soon figuring as 'a half baked intellectual' who finds herself having to draw on the help and support represented by selfless love and experience. Pavani, the exotic actress and actually Pearl's mother—although the younger woman is ignorant of the fact—has had a wild past leading a bohemian life, but her signature song is entitled 'An Old-Fashioned Girl'. Matured by all her experience of the modern world, this is a woman who knows that 'the old-fashioned way is the best'. In that spirit, the older and wiser woman sets out to save

her daughter's 'honour' from the threat posed by her own (Pavani's) lover. In this selfless endeavour, Pavani signals her success with the telephone message 'The Fatherland is saved', the only German reference remaining in a show that begins with an ironic complaint against contaminated theatre and 'Hun music—foreign actors. Call this an English Theatre'.¹⁸

In this respect, *The Land of Smiles*, a Richard Tauber vehicle, was highly suggestive, not least because at first sight it seemed to run much against the historiography implied above, where a modern and modernising musical theatre became conservative and backward looking. Originally produced at the Metropol-Theater in 1929, it was popular in Budapest, Paris and Vienna, becoming a repertoire piece in all four venues before it came to London in 1931. Adapted by Harry Graham and set in pre-war 1912, the show *is* aristocratic in setting and traditional in terms of music and dance, but it does not, unlike many of the operettas of the 20s and 30s, use recitative to any effect. On the contrary, it seems a modern operetta in the formal sense that it inserts songs into contemporary dialogue. More than that, it begins with a modern, liberalising narratology where a young, modern European, Lisa, rejects the advances of her childhood friend, Gustl, for the attractions of an exotic Chinese aristocrat, Prince Sou-Choung—a disposition of favour Gustl, now a dashing young soldier, describes as nothing less than 'horrible'. Lisa responds with customary vigour:

Lisa: Oh, you silly soldiers! You're so conventional, narrow! Hasn't a Chinaman got a soul just like yours? Isn't he a man, just as you are?

Gustl: Not where white women are concerned, no!

Lisa: Weren't his countrymen civilised centuries before ours had begun to be savages? You make me tired!¹⁹

By Act two Sou-Choung and Lisa are married, at least under European law. They return to China, where the former ambassador is now the Governor of Shantung province. They are a modern young couple, although Sou-Choung must negotiate the forces of tradition that require him to ‘marry’ the four wives picked by his family for him. Reluctantly he agrees to go through the formal requirements, but insists that he will change the ancient laws that prevent him from making Lisa his ‘true’ wife, rather than the mere mistress ill wishers claim her to be. But Sou-Choung has not reckoned with the forcefulness of his European wife, who refuses to allow this ceremony of marriage to take place under any circumstances and threatens to leave. At this point, *The Land of Smiles* takes an astonishing turn. The charming, romantic leading man, Sou-Choung, undergoes a virtually complete transformation. He imprisons his wife and has the tongue ripped out of the mouth of a servant, Chi-Fu. By Act three, what began as a liberalising narrative goes sharply into reverse as Gustl turns up to rescue Lisa from the clutches of a now disconcertingly alien Other. The romance that promises to challenge conventional barriers of race and culture, like an earlier twentieth-century version of *West Side Story*, transmutes into a warning parable as the show now frantically back peddles. In this sense, *The Land of Smiles* not only confirms operetta of the 1920s and 30s as a commodity constituted in particularly conservative ways, it also mirrors a wider historical narrative where the traditional nature of musical theatre becomes much less compromised by its attraction to, and attempted assimilation of, the modern.

Im Weißen Rössl: 1930s spectacular

As the standard narrative dynamic shifted, so too did the nature of translation. The extreme version of adaptation typical of the 1890s and 1900s was displaced in the

1920 and 30s. Now, the task facing producers wanting to transfer successful shows was no longer how to reinterpret them for local audiences, but rather how to reproduce the original in as pure a form as possible. Thus in the 1920s and 30s, when Berlin operettas were specifically marketed for their high-status classiness, the original text, previously subjected to wild interference, was now treated more cautiously—in the case of the musical text and its arrangement with something approaching reverence, so much so that even quite small divergences required explanation. The English production of *The Dubarry*, for example, was close to the German version in almost all respects. The libretto copy in the Lord Chamberlain's collection contains a note providing the *raison d'être* for a relatively minor change—'in the German version Jeanne sang a few words of her song at the end of this scene but it is much more effective dramatically if the only music comes from the orchestra.'²⁰

Shows were now imported with minimal interference, often coming over with their star performers intact, Richard Tauber being the obvious example of an operetta singer who could be marketed internationally in this way. Beginning his career in Vienna, Tauber moved to Berlin in the late 1920s, making the transition from opera to operetta. Having starred in Franz Lehár's *Das Land des Lächelns* at Berlin's Metropol-Theater in 1929, he also appeared in the adapted version, *The Land of Smiles*, at Drury Lane in 1931.²¹ In fact, Tauber returned to London several times and stayed for good after Germany annexed Austria in 1938. In that same year, incidentally, Fritzi Massary, the best paid actress in Weimar Germany, also left Austria for London, again in part because of the annexation. Noël Coward admired her so much that he based *Operetta* (1938) on her life story and had Massary herself play the part of the aging diva Liesl Haren in the London production.²²

Sometimes shows were bought as a package. After it had played to packed houses for five months at the Großes Schauspielhaus in Berlin, for example, the music hall impresario Oswald Stoll brought *Im Weißen Rössl* (1930) to the Coliseum Theatre in London, where it opened in 1932 as *The White Horse Inn*. Following several months of twice-daily shows, Stoll sent a smaller production on tour to Birmingham, Manchester and many other cities. In transfer terms, however, the point about *The White Horse Inn* was not just the extent of its travel but also its consistency and faithfulness to the original. Indeed, it was bought and sold complete with book, music, stage design, Tyrolese singers and dancers, Bavarian zither players and its own continental version of a jazz band, the White Horse Syncopators. Only the main cast was changed, in part because German and Austrian actors were unable to perform in English, but also because the reality of German accents was not acceptable to postwar British audiences, even in the context of a play set in the Alps near Salzburg. In the main, however, the ruralist fantasy of this *singspiel* proved eminently marketable outside of Germany and after its success in London the show moved on in this form to Paris, Vienna, New York and many other cities. It was a virtually complete touring product, a forerunner in many ways of the modern ‘megamusical’, the late-modern digitised version of musical theatre that can be reproduced anywhere as part of the general global transnationalisation of cultural production.²³

Im Weißen Rössl was suggestive of wider trends in cultural transfer and musical theatre culture in other ways. Originally adapted from a comic play produced in Berlin in 1897, the musical version appeared an exception to the trade in historical romances most typical of the 1920s and 30s. It was, in some ways, contemporary in styling. Set in picturesque Austria, it involved the relatively new phenomenon of mass travel to the extent that the show and the travel industry collaborated, much as

musicals in the 1890 and 1900s shared material territory with consumerism and the department store. A contemporary edition of the Baedeker, for instance, praised the natural beauty of the region where the show was set, the Salzkammergut region of Upper Austria, in terms derived from the show itself. It described the real White Horse Inn as ‘nicely situated’ on the lakefront next to where a steamboat could be taken for a romantic trip across the Wolfgangsee, just as it was in the musical. The Inn itself was even awarded a Baedeker star. At the same time, modern culture, jazz for example, was assimilated to tradition in the show, as was standard in earlier musical comedies and operettas. There was some preference for the ‘healthier’ spirit of boy scouts who ‘know no earthly fears’ over more hedonistic young people ‘dancing wildly to a jazz band’.²⁴ It could be argued, however, that in juxtaposing urban contemporaneity against rural innocence, *Im Weißen Rössl* followed a general pattern established in countless pre-war shows—*The Arcadians*, *The Quaker Girl*, *A Country Girl*, *Filmzauber* and so on. Again, in narratological terms the story of a waiter falling for his attractive, strong-willed employer and the subsequent working through of numerous love plots could well have come from a musical comedy or operetta of the 1900s, a ‘girl’ show, and may have been one reason why the show was so popular in London, where Stoll’s production enjoyed 650 performances—in some respects it recalled the homely musical comedy immediately recognisable as a West End product.

Indeed, up to a point the show could be taken to represent a more or less continuous tradition of late-nineteenth, early-twentieth century musical theatre. If it posited and even celebrated some of the central social dynamics of twentieth-century Europe, the efficiency of modern women for example, it was also securely positioned in a broadly traditional framework, represented here by the extraordinary appearance,

at the end of Act two, of Emperor Franz Joseph, accompanied by a triumphalist chorus:

Hail to His Majesty!

Hail to His Majesty

God save His Majesty,

And bless the Fatherland.

This was apparently just as acceptable to West End audiences as to those in Budapest, Paris and Berlin—although one would have thought this section if any was an obvious opportunity for ‘adaptation’. ‘It is’, the Emperor announces in the West End version ‘a great, pleasure to me to be among my loyal subjects whose welfare is so very dear to me!’ and for the rest of the show his function is to preside over the restoration of order from comic mayhem.²⁵

However, while *Im Weißen Rössl* evoked urban contemporaneity at various points, its more serious point of orientation was a mythical rural idyll. According to contemporary critical opinion, its popularity derived not from narrative elements that, by the 1920s, were decisively stale, but, rather from its quality as spectacular—its remarkable capacity for staging a deeply appealing chocolate-box fantasy of Germany as ‘Austria’. Thus the ‘picture....was the only person of any importance’. The story became no more than a divergence—‘the scenery, the dresses, and a vague impression that we are holidaying in Tirol are the substance of the evening’s enjoyment’. The *Times* reviewer continued to explain how this all worked:

On one side of the auditorium a gaily decorated hotel projects a wing, and on the other stands an equally solid chalet, so that we are assailed on all sides by the yodelling of the dairymaids, Alpine guides, cowherds, foresters and what not, who appear at windows and on balconies whenever a chorus strikes up from the

stage. In the background Professor Stern has set an enticing vista of mountains, lake, and vale. Thunder rolls among the mountain and the heavy clouds disgorge real water. Steamers come up the lake and motor cars unload crowds of singers at the doors of the hotel. There are innumerable processions of children, shepherds, town councillors and Tirolese dancers among the ever changing strips of scenery, but it is the scenery and the costumes that always engage our attention.²⁶

The reviewer for the *Era* concurred, seeing ‘all the resources of modern stage craft’ utilised in the production. The story may have been ‘as incidental as a mountain stream’, but the show had all the sensual charm of a tourist attraction:

colour, light, music are perfectly blended in an entertainment that is almost breathless in interest. It is as if you had arrived at a jolly inn in the Tyrol on a very exciting day. You jump off the charabanc, take your coffee by the lake, admire the glow on the mountains, and then rush under one of the hundred or so umbrellas to escape the rain

If much of this *seemed* real, if the rain was actually wet ‘and if the sunshine that follows is only the Schwabe lighting, it is so glowing that you want to join the girls in the bathing pool, or pat the goats, or—best of all—to take a trip round the lake on the Francis Joseph.’²⁷

The same reviewer wondered if the introduction of the ‘real’ Austrian Emperor Franz Josef might have punctured the charm of this fantasy idyll and indeed thought it a ‘miracle’ that the presence of a German Emperor had been allowed to ‘remain in the script’ of the West End production.²⁸ The *Times*, however, realised how far removed from any dangerous realities that vision of authority really was. ‘The last of the

Austrian Emperors' he wrote, 'appearing in the person of Mr Frederick Leister, gives us the best sentimental episode of the evening' and, in any case,

is soon swallowed up in a fresh flood of brilliant colour, and soon afterwards we have reached Professor Stern's spectacular climax, a modern transformation scene which takes us for a trip around the lake. The music has a jolly ring, moving generally to the hearty thumping of beer mugs on table.²⁹

Here it becomes clear that what made *Im Weißen Rössl* so much of its time was not its engagement with modernity but, as with so many 'Austrian' operettas of the period, its retreat into romance, escapism and the wonders of spectacular.

In sharp contrast to the earlier period, then, the 1920s and 30s saw much greater conservatism and product stability in cultural transfer, as well as a taste for history and pageantry that Berlin seemed particularly skilled at satisfying over and over. What did these shifts mean? There are a number of possibilities here. It could be that the unwillingness to interfere with the prototype text was a product of the special reverence held for German musical products as high status 'works', reinforced by the continued importance of Wagner. It should be noted, however, that this kind of Germanophilism had been just as strong in the Victorian and Edwardian periods and yet had not prevented major interferences to, for example, Lehár's *The Merry Widow*. As we have seen, in its first West End production in 1907 this now classic text suffered the usual dropping of scenes, interpolations of new songs, insertion of modern singers with limited vocal ranges, much to Lehár's initial regret and the sheer humiliation of added comic sketches. Even if popular operetta was becoming more elevated by the twenties and thirties, that could not explain the shift away from contemporaneity so characteristic of the shows that worked the Berlin/London transfer route in this period.

It is possible, of course, that there is no singular dynamic to these multiple shifts, just as there may be no single explanation for what are clearly complex cultural histories. It does seem, however, there is some kind of consistency here. The displacement of a lively, competitive and contemporary cosmopolitanism by the narrative and stylistic securities of postwar operetta is of a piece with the shift from a fluid, appropriating, hybridising adaptation culture to the conservatism where the prototype show is reproduced in almost perfect likeness. There is a strong sense here of an asserting, advancing and genuinely cosmopolitan popular culture being transformed by global war, economic upheavals and new levels of social and political bifurcation, into something safer, more retrospective and retreatist. In this case transfer history leads to a substantial revision of our sense of the engagement between musical theatre and the more multiple modernities of the long turn of century.

Notes

¹ *The Times*, 23 January 1915.

² See Gordon Williams, *British Theatre in the Great War: A Revaluation* (London: Continuum, 2003), 20.

³ Robert Courtneidge, *I was an Actor once* (London: Hutchinson, 1930), 219.

⁴ Martin Baumeister, *Kriegstheater: Großstadt, Front und Massenkultur* (Essen: Klartext, 2005).

⁵ *The Era*, 26 September 1919.

⁶ Richard Traubner, *Operetta: A Theatrical History*, 259.

⁷ Traubner, *Operetta*, 254.

⁸ Kálmán, however, was a Hungarian Jew. He was decorated by the anti-Semitic pro-Fascist Nicholas Horthy of Hungary, but ‘the dictator nevertheless advised him to leave Europe. And Hitler’s representatives failed in their attempt to have Kálmán decreed an honorary Aryan.

The large Kálmán Palais in Vienna was stripped of its valuables, which were sent to Zurich, and the Kálmán family left Austria.’ Léon Jessel, remembered for the volksoperetta *Das Schwarzwaldmädel* (*The Black Forest Girl*), a Great War hit, was also a Jew. In 1936 ‘the authorities attempted to separate him and his wife. In 1941, after writing a letter complaining of his ‘difficult’ circumstances, Jessel was ‘tortured by the Gestapo, which led to his death a few weeks later’. See Richard Traubner, *Operetta*, 263, 272, 299.

⁹ *The Times*, April 8 1920.

¹⁰ *The Times*, February 26 1923.

¹¹ *The Stage*, April 22 1922.

¹² *The Times*, February 22 1922.

¹³ Louis Henry Jacobsen, ‘The Drama of the Year’, *The Stage Year Book 1921-25*.

¹⁴ See *The Stage Year Book 1921-25*.

¹⁵ Traubner, *Operetta*, 249.

¹⁶ The transfer of straight plays continued, with plays by Edgar Wallace, for example, being especially popular in Berlin.

¹⁷ Fred Thompson, *The Cousin From Nowhere* (British Library: LCP, 1923).

¹⁸ A. P. Herbert, *The Mother of Pearl* (British Library: LCP, 1933). In the German original, Fritzi Massary played the lead. In the London version Alice Delysia took over the part of the mature Pavani.

¹⁹ Harry Graham, *The Land of Smiles* (British Library: LCP, 1931).

²⁰ Eric Maschwitz, *The Dubarry* (British Library: LCP, 1932).

²¹ See also chapter five in this collection for an account of this production and Tauber’s part in it [000-000].

²² The book version of *Operette* was dedicated ‘To Fritzi Massary with love and admiration’, Noël Coward, *Operette* (London: Heinemann, 1938).

²³ See J. Burston, ‘The Megamusical: New Forms and Relations in Global Production’, Ph.D., University of London, 1998. See also Jessica Sternfeld, *The Megamusical* (Bloomington, Indian: Indiana University Press, 2006).

²⁴ Harry Graham, *The White Horse Inn* (British Library: LCP, 1931).

²⁵ *The White Horse Inn*.

²⁶ *The Times*, April 9 1931. The 'Professor Stern' referred to in this review was Ernst Stern, 'the greatest scenic artist in the world' (*Era*, May 14 1931), who worked with Erik Charell, the stage designer on the production.

²⁷ *The Era*, May 14 1931.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *The Times*, April 9 1931.