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Laughter at Auschwitz: George Tabori's "Theater der Peinlichkeit" and "Vergangenheitsbewältigung" in Post-War Germany

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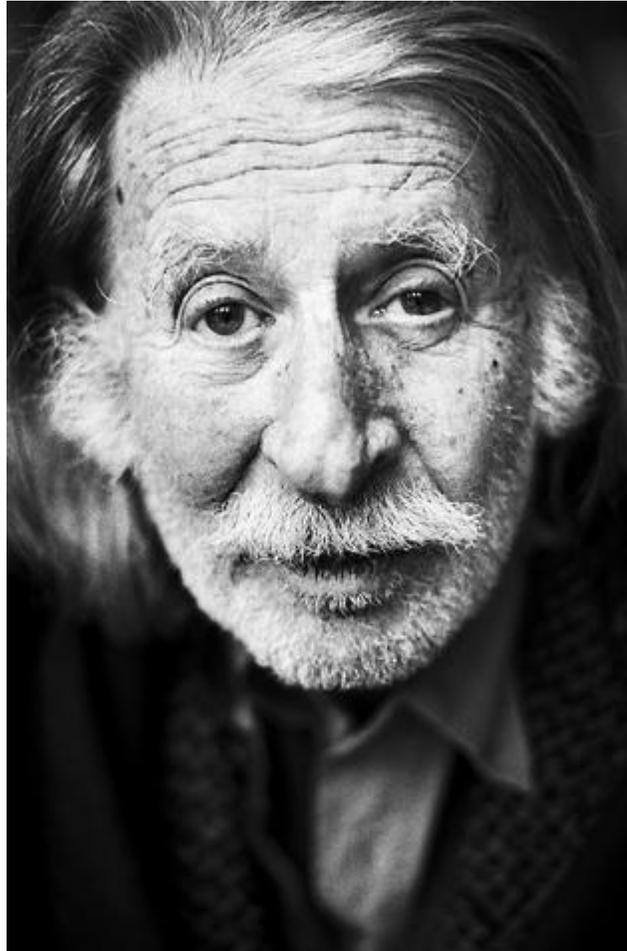
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George Tabori's "Theater der Peinlichkeit" and "Vergangenheitsbewältigung" in Post-War
Germany



Senior Project submitted to
The Division of The Arts
of Bard College

by
Leonie Bell

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
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To George Tabori, for taking your Hitler, and overcoming him through writing, living, and laughing.

Thank you to Mama and Papa for letting me thrive.

Thank you Jean for letting me negotiate my way through this just the way you did.

Thank you George Tabori, for making everything make a little more sense and no sense at all.

Danke.

Ich habe ihn besiegt

Von GEORGE TABORI

Unsere Beziehung war zwar intensiv, aber ganz einseitig. Ich habe ihn nur zweimal gesehen. Das erste Mal am 30. Januar 1933, in jener Nacht, als er sich den Weg zur Macht erschwindelt hatte und sich am Fenster in der Wilhelmstraße im Jubel der Massen badete; er erschien im lodernen Licht der Fakkeln und stand einsam da, als ob ein Mächtiger immer einsam zu sein hätte. Er winkte den Massen zu, und ich habe ihm zugewunken, jung und dumm wie ich war. Er hat mir leid getan, weil mir ein weiser Spruch meiner Großmutter wieder in den Sinn gekommen ist: "Wenn man ganz nach oben gekommen ist, dann bleibt nur noch eins, der Abstieg."

Zum zweiten Mal habe ich ihn bei einer Massenkundgebung gesehen, im Sportpalast. Das war eine verschwitzte Veranstaltung, überaus wirkungsbewußt inszeniert, eine *Passio historica*: Über allem hing ein widerlicher Geruch nach Leichen. Noch Jahre später ist mir dieser Geruch immer wieder in die Nase gestiegen, und ich habe seitdem eine tiefe Abneigung gegen diese Art von Effekthascherei. Das Ganze war allerdings auch wie ein Witz: wegen dem Mißverständnis zwischen dem bombastischen Aufwand um ihn und diesem Bärtchen; das fand ich komisch, wie Tausende andere auch. Er hat "den Teufel überteufelt, den Herodes überrodet", wie Hamlet sagen würde, all jene Bühnengesten und -tricks angewandt, die ich Jahre später beim Theatermachen immer mehr verabscheut habe.

Ich kann also nicht behaupten, daß ich ihn gekannt habe. In meinem Alter spricht man auch nicht gern über Menschen oder Sachen, die man nicht kennt, und doch muß ich sagen, daß wir eine ganz intime Beziehung miteinander hatten: Er hat sich in mein Leben gedrängt, er hat meine Träume vergiftet, meinen Alltag durcheinandergewirbelt, meine Pläne zunichte gemacht; manchmal ist es mir so vorgekommen, als hätte er gerade an mir ein persönliches Interesse gehabt, an meinen Todesängsten und an meinen Triumphen; er hat meiner Mutter die Gallensteine gemacht; er war schuld, daß mein Vater sich im Sammellager Csepel den Fuß gebrochen hat, und dann hat er dafür gesorgt, daß mein Vater in diesen Duschraum gebracht worden ist, wo er erstickt wurde; er hat meinen behinderten Cousin Bela von der Pritsche in der Anstalt geholt, in der er schon zwanzig Jahre lang gewesen ist, und hat ihm mit einem Stuhl den Schädel eingeschlagen; er hat meinem Neffen Jancsi, acht Jahre alt, bei einem Luftangriff den Kopf abgerissen; meine Cousine Klara unter einem Panzer zerquetscht. Er hat mich in die Emigration geschickt und mich dazu gebracht, Marx & Company zu lesen; ich werde höhenkrank, aber er hat mich trotzdem zum Fallschirmspringer gemacht; dann hat er mich dazu gebracht, in Jerusalem Fräulein Feldwebel Freund zu heiraten und auf den verschiedensten Wellenlängen antifaschistische Agitprops zu stammeln; er hat mich dazu angetrieben, Romane und Erzählungen zu schreiben; last but not least: Vorher war ich Mensch und zufällig jüdisch. Jahrelang ist er hinter mir hergejagt und hat mir alle Hoffnung zunichte gemacht auf ein Leben ohne Zorn und ohne Scham. Aber schließlich habe ich gewonnen - nicht bloß, weil ich überlebt habe, ihn und seinesgleichen.

Ich habe ihn besiegt, das darf ich in aller Bescheidenheit sagen, denn es ist ihm nicht gelungen, daß ich ihm und seinesgleichen ähnlich geworden bin, das vor allem hat er nämlich von mir und von der ganzen Menschheit erwartet und haben wollen.

Wenn ich heute an Hitler denke, dann scheint er mir ein gutes Beispiel zu sein für den gespaltenen Menschen, wie Otto Rank ihn beschrieben hat: besessen vom Anspruch auf Göttlichkeit und doch mit einem stinkenden Arschloch versehen. Übrig bleibt mir von ihm die Erinnerung an diesen Geruch.¹

¹ George Tabori, *Bett & Bühne*, (Berlin, Germany: Klaus Wagenbach, 2007), 62.

I Overcame Him

By GEORGE TABORI

Our relationship was intense, but one-sided. I only saw him twice. The first time on the January 30th, 1933, on the night he cheated himself to power and bathed in the masses cheers at the window on Wilhelmstraße; he emerged in the blazing light of the torches and lonesomely stood there, as if a mighty one had to always be lonely. He waved at the masses, and I waved at him, young and dumb as I was. I felt sorry for him because I remembered a wise saying by my grandmother: “Once one has arrived at the top, then only the downfall remains.”

The second time I saw him was at a mass-demonstration at the Sports-palace. It was a sweaty event, most deliberately staged, a *Passio hysterica*: a smell of corpse lingered over everything. Even years later this smell returns to me, and since then I have a deep dislike against this kind of excess of effect. The whole thing was, at the same time, like a joke: because of the disproportionate between the bombastic effort about him and his little mustache; this I found comical, like thousands of others too. He “over-deviled the devil, overrode Herod,” as *Hamlet* would say, he applied the very stage-gestures and -tricks that, years later, I detested more and more when making theater.

I cannot claim that I knew him. In my age one does not like to speak about people or things that one does not know, and yet I must say that we had a very intimate relationship with each other: He pushed himself into my life, he poisoned my dreams, disturbed my everyday life, destroyed my plans; sometimes it seemed to me like he had a very personal interest in me, in my mortal fears and in my triumphs; he gave my mother gallstones; it was his fault that my father broke his foot at the transfer camp Csepel, and then he made sure that my father was brought the shower room, where he was suffocated; he took my disabled cousin Bela from his bed at the asylum he had already been in for 20 years, and beat in his head with a chair; he ripped of my eight-year-old nephew Jancsi’s head during an air raid; he crushed my cousin Klara under a tank.

He sent me into emigration and led me to read Marx & Company; I suffer from altitude-sickness, but he still made me into a parachutist; then he got me to marry Miss Sergeant Freund in Jerusalem and to stammer anti-fascist agitprops on all possible wavelengths; he pushed me to write novels and stories; last but not least: before I was human and Jewish by chance. For years, he chased after me and destroyed all hope for a life without anger and shame. But in the end I won- not just because I survived, him and his kind.

I have overcome him, this I can say with all modesty because he failed to make me akin to him and his kind; for this especially he expected and wanted of me and of all mankind.

When I think of Hitler today, then he seems to me to be a perfect example of the split human, as Otto Rank described him: obsessed his desire for divinity and yet tagged with a stinking asshole. What remains of him for me is the memory of this smell.²

² Tabori, *Bett & Bühne*, trans. by author, 62.

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Introduction

For his premiere of *The Cannibals* at the Berliner Schiller Theater in December of 1969, George Tabori had an escape car waiting just in case the German audience reacted poorly to his play. Not only was he bringing the first Holocaust play set at a concentration camp to the German stage, but it was extremely comedic in nature. Tabori's Holocaust play was funny. This had never been done before, especially not by a Hungarian Jew who had lost most of his family in the Holocaust. No one knew how the German audience, especially the non-Jewish audience, would react. Tabori wanted to be prepared. He needn't have been. The audience responded with standing ovations. The critics were surprised. The American audience had received *The Cannibals* mildly. More importantly, a German audience had never reacted with such enthusiasm to a Holocaust play. What had George Tabori done to the Berlin audience? Two of his later comedic Holocaust plays, *My Mother's Courage*, which premiered in Munich in 1979, and *Mein Kampf*, which premiered in Vienna in 1987, caused similar reactions. As a third generation German-American born and raised in Berlin, I can't help but wonder what happened at the Schiller Theater that night in December 1969. Tabori's "Theater der Peinlichkeit,"³ as it is called nowadays, roused something in the Berlin audience that hadn't been heard in a long time. I suspect it was laughter. Laughter about something the Germans hadn't ever been able to laugh about. They were laughing during a play about the Holocaust. I don't believe it.

In this paper I will to argue that their laughter was a vehicle for something else. Their laughter was a first breath. The German audience was breathing for the first time in a long time. It was alive again. It was responding viscerally and veraciously to something that it had been

³ Guerrero, Chantal. *George Tabori im Spiegel der deutschsprachigen Kritik*, (Köln: Teiresias, 1998), 132.

failing to address. I want to argue that Tabori's "Theater der Peinlichkeit" broke pre-conceived Holocaust-theater taboos by utilizing comedy as a theatrical device. He reinforced this upheaval of taboos by upsetting the victim-perpetrator relationships, confusing the audience's expectations about feelings such as guilt and shame, and breaking down the fourth wall in his work. With his plays *Mein Kampf*, *My Mother's Courage*, and *The Cannibals*, Tabori brought into existence for German theater-goers a new kind of "Vergangenheitsbewältigung," or process of dealing with ones past.

1

Germany in the 1960s and “Vergangenheitsbewältigung”

When Tabori’s *The Cannibals* premiered in Berlin in 1969, Germany was in the midst of an attempt at cultural and societal rejuvenation. After the end of World War II in 1945, but more importantly, after the Holocaust, Germany found itself in an existential crisis: what did it mean to be German after such an atrocity? What did responsibility mean? Germany was in need of answers. (At this point, I would like to note that from now on, when I write about the “German” people, I am referring to non-Jewish Germans. This distinction will continue to be very important in my discussion of Tabori’s work.)

In 1969, what the German nation needed was “Vergangenheitsbewältigung,” a word described by Andreas Huyssen as “the psychic process of remembering, repeating, and working through, a process which has to begin in the individual, but which can only be successfully completed if it is supported by the collective, by society at large.”⁴ With this description, Huyssen refers to Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich’s *The Inability to Mourn*.⁵ The term “Vergangenheitsbewältigung” intimates that the post-war German people, individually and collectively, had to learn to actively mourn, remember, and engage with the fact that they, in one way or another, were part of Germany’s recent, horrific history. For some people this meant dealing with the fact that they had actively been involved in the Nazi regime’s “Final Solution”,

⁴ Huyssen, Andreas. “The Politics of Identification: ‘Holocaust’ and West German Drama.” *New German Critique* 19, no. 1 (Winter, 1980), 120.

⁵ Alexander Mitscherlich, and Margarete Mitscherlich, *The Inability to Mourn*, (New York: Grove Press, 1975).

or the Nazi plan to annihilate all Jews.⁶ For others it meant dealing with the thought that they had accepted the actions of the Nazi regime. Even worse, they had chosen to ignore the truth that death camps did, in fact, exist.⁷ How were the German people going to respond to and mourn their past? How were they going to deal with the fact that they had, in one way or another, been complicit with the Nazi government in working towards not only the annihilation of all Jews but also the civilian population of Eastern Europe?⁸ This complicity may have involved active participation in the persecution of Jews or acquiescence to the Nazi's politics, but it was present. What would it mean for the post-war generation to identify as "German"?

Nationally and internationally, the critique of the German process of "Vergangenheitsbewältigung" was substantial throughout the 1950s and 60s. From abroad, the prominent opinion that the German people were responsible as a nation for the atrocious happenings during the Third Reich went hand in hand with the critique that the Germans had developed a "whole network of mechanisms which (...) aimed at repressing, denying and making unreal (Entwirklichung) Germany's Nazi past."⁹ German critics such as Theodor W. Adorno, a sociologist and philosopher known for his critical theory of society, and the Mitscherlichs, two psycho-analysts, expressed worries that their fellow citizens were not actually undergoing "Vergangenheitsbewältigung", but that they were creating the illusion of "Vergangenheitsbewältigung".¹⁰ The Mitscherlichs were convinced that the "defense against (...) guilt – be it for actions or simply for acquiescence – (...) left traces in the German character."¹¹

In 1967, they would publish a polemical study called "Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern," or "The

⁶ Adam Tooze, *The Wages of Destruction*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 463.

⁷ Ian Kershaw, *Hitler, the Germans, and the Final Solution*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 148.

⁸ Tooze, *The Wages of Destruction*, 668.

⁹ Huyssen, "The Politics of Identification", 120.

¹⁰ Huyssen, "The Politics of Identification", 120.

¹¹ Mitscherlich, *The Inability to Mourn*, 14.

Inability to Mourn,” which explored the Germans’ failure to undergo “Vergangenheitsbewältigung”.¹² This inability to mourn their recent history, argue the Mitscherlichs, was largely due to the German people failing to accept the fact that they were, in some way, willingly complicit with Hitler and his goals.¹³ Since the end of World War II, one question desperately desired an answer: how was a morally broken nation going to honestly and appropriately come to terms with its past?¹⁴

This cultural discourse about the authenticity of Germany’s “Vergangenheitsbewältigung” and the difficulties that surrounded the actual process began to intensify in the 1960s. For one thing, major political events regarding Germany and its recent history were beginning to accumulate, such as the Nazi trials and the 1968 West German student movement. The notorious Eichmann trial, occurring in Jerusalem in 1961, and the long-sought-after “Auschwitz Trial,” happening in Frankfurt between 1963 and 1965, finally took place.¹⁵ Around the same time, a societal schism between the older and younger generations of post-war West Germany came to light. The younger generation, having grown up in a post-war Germany, could not associate with the reality of the Third Reich that their parents’ generation had experienced. They desired a response from the older generation about what it meant to live under Hitler’s dictatorship. Their questions remained largely unanswered. This frustration towards the older generation, amongst other issues, contributed to the 1968 student protests in West Germany,¹⁶ which would continue to escalate well into the 1970s. The West German student movement, though extremely complex in nature, reflects a need for

¹² Tony Judt, *Postwar*, (London: The Penguin Press, 2005), 416.

¹³ Mitscherlich, *The Inability to Mourn*, 23.

¹⁴ Huysen, “The Politics of Identification”, 120.

¹⁵ Judt, *Postwar*, 416.

¹⁶ Judt, *Postwar*, 417.

“Vergangenheitsbewältigung” amongst the younger generation that resembled that of the older generation. Whereas the older generation had been experiencing extreme difficulties in coming to terms with their past, their failure to honestly undergo this important process prevented the younger generation from coming to terms with their country’s history as well. By the late 1960s, it seemed that, especially in West Germany, both generations desired the same thing: an honest way to deal with their past.



Theater and the Shoah in Post-War Germany

Another aspect of the cultural discourse surrounding Germany's post-war "Vergangenheitsbewältigung" involved the representability of the Shoah through art. After the atrocities that had occurred, the question arose, was it possible to make art concerning the Holocaust? The Shoah had put all formerly established ethics of representation in art into question. Critics such as Adorno responded to this conundrum by arguing that after Auschwitz, poems were no longer a possible form of expression.¹⁷ Critics wondered: after Auschwitz, how could art be enjoyed; how could aesthetics of enjoyment exist?¹⁸ Other critics, such as Claude Lanzmann expressed a clear opposition to any kind of representation of the Shoah. Lanzmann saw the Holocaust as unique in that it had a very specific boundary surrounding it that was not to be crossed because of the unspeakable, inexpressible horror that was the Holocaust. According to Lanzmann, whoever crossed this line was guilty of the worst of ethical dishonors. To him, there was no appropriate artistic form of representation concerning the Holocaust.¹⁹ Other concerns about the representation of the Shoah involved the issue of how the public perception of this horrific event might change, should it be shown through art. Would art forever fail to express the inexplicable magnitude of this atrocity? Or even worse, would art simplify the grueling reality of the Holocaust, would it diminish its meaning? Would presenting the Holocaust through art make

¹⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms*, ed. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1967), 34.

¹⁸ Hans-Peter Bayerdörfer, and Jörg Schönert, *Theater gegen das Vergessen : Bühnenarbeit und Drama bei George Tabori*, (Tübingen: M. Niemeyer, 1997), 131.

¹⁹ Bayerdörfer, *Theater gegen das Vergessen*, 131.

it less concerning to mankind?²⁰ I will later return to the question of the representability of the Shoah through art in connection to Tabori's "Theater der Peinlichkeit".

For many artists, however, especially German artists, this self-imposed censorship of representation had to be overcome somehow. A mode had to be found so that Germany could continue to exist as a place outside of the Holocaust. New options and possibilities for "Vergangenheitsbewältigung" had to be found, hopefully through art. A lack of representation of the Shoah might endanger any chance of continuity, of Germany dealing with its history in an engaged, aware way.²¹ As a result, a number of so-called "Bewältigungsdramen," as Andreas Huyssen defines dramas broaching the issue of the Holocaust,²² came to the German stage. Huyssen lists the American stage version of *The Diary of Anne Frank* by Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett from 1956, Max Frisch's *Andorra* from 1961, Rolf Hochhuth's *The Deputy* from 1963, and Peter Weiss' *The Investigation* from 1965 as the most notable "Bewältigungsdramen"²³ of that time. Between the 1950s and 60s, "Bewältigungsdramen" changed in structure and mode of storytelling. The stage version of *The Diary of Anne Frank*, the first play to bring the topic of the Holocaust directly to the German stage, was greeted with "stunned silence" when it opened simultaneously in seven German cities in 1956.²⁴ It soon became clear to critics that the play's success lay largely in the fact that a "concrete face" had been given to the "anonymous suffering."²⁵ The audience could now emotionally attach to one

²⁰ Bayerdörfer, *Theater gegen das Vergessen*, 131-132.

²¹ Bayerdörfer, *Theater gegen das Vergessen*, 131.

²² Huyssen, Andreas. "Unbewältigte Vergangenheit—Unbewältigte Gegenwart." *Geschichte im Gegenwartsdrama*, ed. Reinhold Grimm and Jost Hermand (Stuttgart, 1976), 39-53.

²³ Huyssen, "The Politics of Identification", 119.

²⁴ Huyssen, "The Politics of Identification", 123.

²⁵ Guerrero, *George Tabori im Spiegel*, 132.

individual and her destiny, and translate any feelings of anxiety about the play's topic into empathy for one individual victim.²⁶ Anne describes:

We are all a little thinner. The Van Daans' "discussions" are as violent as ever. Mother still does not understand me. But then I don't understand her either. There is one great change, however. A change in myself. I read somewhere that girls of my age don't feel quite certain of themselves. That they become quiet within and begin to think of the miracle that is taking place in their bodies. I think that what is happening to me is so wonderful . . . not only what can be seen, but what is taking place inside. Each time it has happened, I have a feeling that I have a sweet secret. (*We hear the chimes and then a hymn being played on the carillon outside.*) And in spite of any pain, I long for the time when I shall feel that secret within me again.²⁷

In the 1960s, this theatrical transference of emotional attachment onto the suffering of one individual radically transformed into a stricter, documentary-style of story-telling. Looking to question and expose Germany's incomplete handling of its post-war de-nazification process by using the authority of historical documents, 1960s "Bewältigungs-dramen" such as Weiss' *The Investigation* approached the Shoah from a more objective, almost presentational standpoint than had the 1950s "Bewältigungs-dramen".²⁸ In his 1965 documentary play, *The Investigation*, Weiss places the transcripts from the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trials of 1963-1965 on stage:

JUDGE: You didn't shoot once

DEFENDANT #2: I did
 once

JUDGE: You did shoot once

DEFENDANT #2: It was an exception
 I was ordered

²⁶ Huyssen, "The Politics of Identification", 123.

²⁷ Frances Goodrich, and Albert Hackett, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd, 1998), 71.

²⁸ Huyssen, "The Politics of Identification", 132.

to take part in an execution
 JUDGE: How did that happen
 DEFENDANT #2: Twice
 on that single occasion
 Later I refused
 to take part in such things
 I said
 Either I work here
 or I work with Identification
 I can't
 do both jobs at the same time²⁹

In *The Investigation*, Weiss, who survived the Holocaust by emigrating to Sweden in 1938, wants to depict the exact reality of the concentration camps. By choosing very specific excerpts from the original transcripts and concentrating them into one play, he looks to engage the audience's awareness of their complicity in the Holocaust. He utilizes this documentary-style depiction of the Auschwitz trials to prevent "emotional identification with individual victims."³⁰ To him, the horror of Auschwitz should evoke feelings of awareness rather than empathy.

The theater theorist Hans-Peter Bayerdörfer considers these structural and stylistic changes in German post-war theater history to be most problematic during the 1950s and 60s. In *Avant propos: Theatergeschichte im Schatten der Shoah*, Bayerdörfer's book about how the Shoah influenced German theater history, he defines these changes, as seen in *The Diary of Anne*

²⁹ Peter Weiss, *Marat/Sade, The Investigation, and The Shadow of the Body of the Coachman*, eds. Robert Cohen (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1998), 233.

³⁰ Huyssen, "The Politics of Identification", 123.

Frank and *The Investigation*, as “philo-Semitic.”³¹ In this case, “philo-Semitic” stands as the opposite to “anti-Semitic.” “Anti-Semitism” is defined as “hostility and prejudice directed toward Jews or Judaism.”³² “Philo-Semitism,” in this case is made up of “philo-,” which means “having a strong affinity or preference for; loving,”³³ and “Semitism” which means “A policy or predisposition in favor of Jews.”³⁴ In other words, Bayerdörfer understands “philo-Semitism” as “having an interest or affinity for Jews and Jewish culture and history.”

To Bayerdörfer, post-war German theater became “philo-semitic” with its sudden increase in Jewish-themed theater, or “Bewältigungsdramen.” He includes both the emotionally-motivated and the documentary-style “Bewältigungsdramen” such as *The Diary of Anne Frank* and *The Investigation* in this “philo-Semitic” movement. Bayerdörfer finds both styles to be problematic to the representability of the Shoah in theater as well as Germany’s process of “Vergangenheitsbewältigung.” On the one hand, he argues, emotionally-motivated “Bewältigungsdramen” come troublingly close to creating an uncontrollable attachment to the Jewish character, this way convoluting the actual issue at hand. On the other hand, Bayerdörfer reasons, the documentary-style “Bewältigungsdramen” run the risk of inappropriately idealizing the Jewish character in a way that it removes the Jewish character from all individual and historical reality.³⁵ In other words, he worries that the Holocaust might lose its indispensable shock value and magnitude if presented from too far a distance. What also strikes Bayerdörfer as questionable in regards to the “philo-semitic” approach to theater in the 1950s and 1960s is its seemingly constant and strict distribution of the perpetrator and victim roles. He argues that this

³¹ Bayerdörfer, *Theater gegen das Vergessen*, 9.

³² The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 5th ed., s.v. “anti-Semitism.”

³³ The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 5th ed., s.v. “philo-.”

³⁴ The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 5th ed., s.v. “Semitism.”

³⁵ Bayerdörfer, *Theater gegen das Vergessen*, 9.

clear distribution of roles allows the audience to disassociate too easily from the plays' messages. In *The Diary of Anne Frank*, there is a clear victim, Anne. By empathizing intensely with Anne, the audience runs the danger of forgetting the fact that Anne's story revolves around the actual theme of the play, the Holocaust. The risk of disassociation in *The Investigation* lies in the basic fact that the play is specifically about what happened in the concentration camps. In this case, audience members might too easily remove themselves from the play's intent because they themselves were never at the camps. They might not connect the "perpetrators" from the camps with their own roles during the "Third Reich."

Bayerdörfer sees "Bewältigungsdramen" in the 1950s and early 1960s as highly problematic to the rejuvenation of German culture and identity at that time. He considers the over-indulgence in one extreme style of theater as potentially hindering an honest, healthy rebuilding of German culture. I agree with Bayerdörfer and argue that with his "Theater der Peinlichkeit," Tabori managed to find a middle ground.



George Tabori and the German People

George Tabori, born in 1914 in Budapest, Hungary to Jewish parents, Kornél and Elsa Tábori, spent much of his adolescence learning hotel management in Berlin and Dresden. In 1935, after Hitler's rise and the Nazi's increased dissemination of anti-Semitic propaganda, his parents sent him to England, where Tabori began work as a war-correspondent and BBC journalist. Upon emigrating to the United States in 1947, Tabori became a screenwriter, for Hitchcock's *I Confess* amongst other things, and a translator of works such as *Andorra* by Max Frisch and *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* by Brecht.³⁶ After finding an increased interest in playwriting, Tabori premiered his Holocaust play *The Cannibals* first in New York City in 1968, and then in Berlin in 1969.

Whereas Tabori's mother Elsa survived the war, his father, Kornelius, or Kornél, died in the gas chambers of Auschwitz. Tabori includes both his parents in his work. In *My Mother's Courage*, Tabori puts on stage the literal story of Elsa narrowly escaping deportation to Auschwitz through a spontaneous act of courage. In *The Cannibals*, Tabori references his father at the beginning with "In memory of Cornelius Tabori, perished in Auschwitz, a small eater." This relates to a painfully-comedic story Tabori heard from another Auschwitz-survivor about his father. Apparently Mr. Tabori, whilst on his way into the gas chamber, held the door open for a fellow inmate, saying, "After you, Mr. Mandelbaum."³⁷

³⁶Gabrielle H. Cody, and Evert Sprinchorn, ed. *The Encyclopedia of Modern Drama*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), s.v. "Tabori, George."

³⁷ George Tabori, *Bett & Bühne*, (Berlin, Germany: Klaus Wagenbach, 2007), 60.

As mentioned before, Tabori had an escape car waiting for his 1969 premiere of *The Cannibals* at the Berlin Schiller Theater. *The Cannibals* was the first play set at a concentration camp to be brought to the German stage. The Jewish community especially had protested strongly about this play being brought to Germany.³⁸ Tabori took his chances, premiered his play, and it was received with standing ovations. What had *The Cannibals* changed in the audience that had responded with silence to Peter Weiss' *The Investigation* in the early 60s? His play clearly broke the taboos that post-war "Bewältigungsdramen" from the 50s and 60s had established: he set the play in a concentration camp, he distorted the victim-perpetrator-relationship, and he introduced humor into this horrific world of the Holocaust. Such a visceral reaction to a "Bewältigungsdrama" had been unheard of in post-war German Theater. What had Tabori done? It seems, he had successfully implemented his "Theater der Peinlichkeit," and simultaneously created a potentially potent opportunity for "Vergangenheitsbewältigung" for the German audience.

In 1981, a German critic, after watching Tabori's rehearsals for two months, wrote that Tabori's theater was the "mirror image of his ego- the tragedy of Tabori: through his work, he remembers Germany and simultaneously revenges himself upon Germany. Whoever hinders his work, is suffocating him."³⁹ This statement does not fit into Tabori's personal reflections about his relationship with Germany. Whereas his relationship with Germans was complex, and this complexity strongly influenced his work and beliefs about theater, it was in no way one-sided and negative. Tabori made the point several times throughout his career that his relationship with Germany was not based primarily on the historical incidence of the Nazis, (or "Germans" as

³⁸ Wend Kässens, comp., *Der Spielmacher*, (Berlin: Klaus Wagenbach, 2004), 125.

³⁹ Kässens, *Der Spielmacher*, 126.

many people might define the Nazis), being responsible for the decimation of his family. During his “Büchnerpreis” address in 1992, Tabori stated that he does not know many Germans, but most of the Germans that he knows, he loves because they offered him safety, trust, or even a silent embrace.⁴⁰ One German that he loves, Tabori continued, saved his mother from the “fire”; another one, who was his boss at a Berlin restaurant in 1933, kicked out the “little Nazi” that protested against Tabori’s presence.⁴¹ To him, it seems, it was more a matter of who he became because of the Nazis. It was not his Jewish parents or his upbringing, he said in a conversation with Peter Teuwsen in 2005, that made him Jewish per se, but it was the Nazis.⁴² In other words, it was Hitler who made him into a Jew, and by making him into a Jew, he made him into to a life-long exile.⁴³ This theme of “exile” or of “native versus alien” comes up often in Tabori’s work, especially in *Mein Kampf*. As I will later illustrate in *Mein Kampf* as in *My Mother’s Courage*, Tabori plays with, or even provokes, by upsetting the roles and power distinctions between characters. In other words, he upsets not only pre-conceived victim and perpetrator roles but also shows how the power in those “categories” fluctuates constantly within the characters.

Tabori appears as a man dealing with a two-sided monster within him. On the one hand, he shows survivors guilt, or guilt about being alive when his family perished in the Shoah.⁴⁴ On the other hand, he exhibits an immense desire to move forward, and to question the rigid notions of how an honest discourse about the Holocaust might begin to exist between Germans and Jews. Being a man who, after being called crazy by friends for returning to Germany as a Jew, left his wife in America and moved to Germany after his premiere of *The Cannibals* in Berlin, Tabori

⁴⁰ Tabori, *Bett & Bühne*, 23.

⁴¹ Tabori, *Bett & Bühne*, 23-24.

⁴² Tabori, *Bett & Bühne*, 45.

⁴³ Tabori, *Bett & Bühne*, 61-62.

⁴⁴ Kässens, *Der Spielmacher*, 141.

clearly chose to battle this monster.⁴⁵ As I will attempt to illustrate shortly, *Mein Kampf*, *My Mother's Courage*, and *The Cannibals* illustrate his acknowledgement of his life-long quest to deal with his own past and identity. Before I do so, however, I want to focus on Tabori's "Theater der Peinlichkeit," or "theater of embarrassment or pain."

⁴⁵ Kässens, *Der Spielmacher*, 141.

4

Tabori, the Jewish people, the German People, and Theater

I find Tabori's "Theater der Peinlichkeit" inextricably linked to his own past and identity, as well as his understanding of how humans function in light of disaster in their lives. In this context, this includes the Germans' struggle to come to terms with their past, as well as the basic human struggle of coming to terms with one's existence in spite of one's past. In fact, Tabori seems to find the term "coming to terms with the past" rather problematic. He doesn't believe that one can ever fully "come to terms" with the past. He does believe that one can learn to deal with it, and learn to live with it as part of oneself. This process however cannot take place through "accusations, revenge, pity, or glorification."⁴⁶ He believes that in a world in which pain, embarrassment, and humiliation often hold the upper hand, the only way to deal with one's past is to remember it, or re-experience it in some way.⁴⁷ Tabori argues that this act of "remembering" must be done sensually through every sense of the body. It is impossible, argues Tabori, to "remember" one's past without "sensually remembering and re-experiencing it with one's skin, nose, tongue, behind, feet, and stomach."⁴⁸ "Only what the body remembers, enters the mind. And the body regains its scent, and then its sense of smell."⁴⁹ Here, Tabori plays with the idea of the body's senses reflecting the well-being of the mind. Furthermore, he seems to be implying a visceral, unconquerable connection between the body and the mind. The sixth sense, or the mind, can only be healthy if the body, or the other five senses are healthy. Tabori, admitting himself to

⁴⁶ Tabori, *Bett & Bühne*, 63.

⁴⁷ Guerrero, *George Tabori im Spiegel*, 132.

⁴⁸ Tabori, *Bett & Bühne*, 47.

⁴⁹ Tabori, *Bett & Bühne*, 63.

be increasingly overwhelmed by the universe he inhabits, finds theater to be the necessary and most successful process of helping both the mind and body “remember” and regain their “smell.” He is not interested in recreating history and its gruesome details. He is not interested in documenting the horror of Auschwitz through art.⁵⁰ Instead, he is interested in seeing how theater can help the theater-goer and the theater-maker’s memory. In that sense, to bring the discussion back to how Tabori’s “Theater der Peinlichkeit” relates to his past and to the Germans, it is not Tabori’s mission to avenge the Jewish people by bringing the Holocaust to the stage, or to illustrate a marked tension between the German people and the Jewish people. On the contrary, Tabori’s quest for a “sensual”, truthful remembrance of the past through theater seems to intimate that Tabori finds there to be a strong connection between the German people, the Jews, and theater. I want to argue that Tabori sees the theater as connected to the Jewish people, and the Jewish people as connected to the German people.⁵¹

First and foremost, Tabori finds a commonality amongst his fellow citizens, German and Jewish, in regards to how dishonestly they “remember” their past. He recalls sometimes noticing the people around him, Jews and Germans, turning blue, as if they were about to burst. This unnatural shade of blue is a sign to Tabori of unfinished business, of incomplete “remembrance.”⁵² “Only few of us have managed to forget that which we want to forget, and we can only forget what we have really remembered,”⁵³ he writes for the opening of a play in 1978 in Munich. As I have mentioned before, in Tabori’s work there must be and is a definite distinction between “Jews” and “Germans”, at least in this context. In Tabori’s eyes, however, when it comes to the desire to forget, to leave behind the reality of the Holocaust, there exists no

⁵⁰ Tabori, *Bett & Bühne*, 63.

⁵¹ Tabori, *Bett & Bühne*, 46.

⁵² Tabori, *Bett & Bühne*, 47.

⁵³ Tabori, *Bett & Bühne*, 47.

separation. He is aware of the cultural importance of phrases such as “we must never forget” or “whoever forgets the past, has been condemned to relive it.”⁵⁴ He is also aware of the fact that the Jewish people and the German people, if seen as two separate groups, may attribute different meaning to, each within their own historical context. However, to him, both “sides” want to forget, perhaps in slightly different ways. Nevertheless, in trying to do so, they become sick, and in this sickness the desire to forget spreads.⁵⁵ A body is a body, whether Jewish, German, or other, and it will respond with stink and the color blue to the failure of “sensual remembrance.”⁵⁶ Tabori sees no distinction between the Jewish pain, and the German pain, and in this lays the essence of his “Theater der Peinlichkeit.” We, humans, may think that history has separated us for eternity, but we are inevitably bound to one another through this same history. In our desire to forget, we must find a way to collectively remember. In that sense, the Jewish people and the German people have become inextricably linked to one another.

Tabori also believes that theater and the Jewish people are connected.⁵⁷ Just as, to him, the Jewish people and the German people are bound to one another through history, theater and the Jewish people are historically and circumstantially bound to one another. The Jewish people, for centuries, have been haunted by anti-Semitism, and with this, the pain of constant exile. With being exiled come pain, humiliation, and embarrassment, or “Peinlichkeit”. Etymologically, the German word “Peinlichkeit” stems from “pein,” or “pain.” To Tabori, the Jewish people are innately “peinlich” because of their history. If the Jewish people are “peinlich” (or painful, humiliating, and embarrassing) then, Tabori states, a medium for this “Peinlichkeit” must be found. In this case, this “medium of Peinlichkeit” is theater. Theater, in Tabori’s eyes, confronts

⁵⁴ Tabori, *Bett & Bühne*, 46.

⁵⁵ Tabori, *Bett & Bühne*, 46.

⁵⁶ Tabori, *Bett & Bühne*, 47.

⁵⁷ Guerrero, *George Tabori im Spiegel*, 113.

the audience with realities that they'd rather not deal with. In other words, theater forces the audience to remember that which they'd rather forget. It pushes them to deal with pain, humiliation, and embarrassment. In that way, theater is the perfect medium for the Jewish "Peinlichkeit".⁵⁸ Additionally, Tabori finds there to be a common reaction to both the Jewish people and theater. Carrying this common characteristic of "Peinlichkeit," both the Jewish people and theater have lived through periods of potential destruction. Through being labeled as undesirable and both fighting to survive, they are inevitably connected. They work off one another and through one another.⁵⁹ This relation plays a large role in Tabori's "Theater der Peinlichkeit".

If, in Tabori's mind, the German people and the Jewish people are forever connected through their joint history and their communal "sickness" of wanting to forget but not being able to; and if, in Tabori's mind, the Jewish people and theater are interconnected through their joint history of being "undesirable" and, more importantly, their shared characteristic of "Peinlichkeit", then how do German people and theater relate to each other? How do the Germans fit into Tabori's "Theater der Peinlichkeit"? For one thing, Tabori finds the Germans to be suffering of a certain malaise. He calls it the "German Misere"⁶⁰ In German, the word "Misere" can mean misery, calamity, distress, or affliction. Tabori bases this "German Misere," mostly on the so-called "anti-emotionalism" of the Germans. This "anti-emotionalism," to Tabori, defines the Germans' fear of emotion.⁶¹ This is where Tabori's interest in Bertolt Brecht comes in, as well as his later attempt to re-appropriate Brechtian technique into his work. For Tabori, Brecht, though very effective at extracting a sense of awareness from his audience, is

⁵⁸ Guerrero, *George Tabori im Spiegel*, 129.

⁵⁹ Guerrero, *George Tabori im Spiegel*, 129.

⁶⁰ Tabori, *Bett & Bühne*, 116.

⁶¹ Tabori, *Bett & Bühne*, 119.

German in that he objectifies emotion; he fails to subjectify it. In Brecht's plays, he argues, you must search for the emotional and psychological intimacy.⁶² Brecht stays away from emotional intensity. For Tabori, Brecht and the German people have an alienated relationship not only to the emotional, but also to vocabulary such as "psychology". When he first came to Germany, he remembers, psychology was a "dirty word," an insult. "Emotion" held similar negative connotations.⁶³ The "German Misere," or fear of emotion, so Tabori argues, has created a rift between thinking and feeling amongst the German people. As a result, the "German Misere" prevents the German people from understanding the concept of fun, and more importantly of humor.⁶⁴ Tabori defines this fear of emotion, and thus, this lack of humor as the German pain, or the German version of "Peinlichkeit".⁶⁵ In his eyes, the German people have yet to learn how to come to grips with their fear of emotion; they are embarrassed and pained by it; it is "peinlich" to them. They must learn how to laugh, and through their laughter they must learn to "remember" what they are trying to "forget". In that way, Tabori finds the German people to be unavoidably bound to theater and the Jewish people because of their own feelings of "Peinlichkeit." More importantly, however, he has created a connection between the essentials of his "Theater der Peinlichkeit": pain and humor.

⁶²Kässens, *Der Spielmacher*, 24.

⁶³ Kässens, *Der Spielmacher*, 24.

⁶⁴ Kässens, *Der Spielmacher*, 79.

⁶⁵ Kässens, *Der Spielmacher*, 14.

5

Tabori's "Theater der Peinlichkeit"

Pain and humor: One might think, upon first glance, that these two terms are opposites, that they are irreconcilable with one another. How can one laugh about something painful? For Tabori, laughter and pain are, in fact, part of one another. To Tabori, laughter exists because of pain. As Tabori liked to ask, "what is the shortest German joke? Auschwitz."⁶⁶ This joke expresses his perception of the relationship between pain and humor extremely well. In Tabori's mind, "a good joke is always sad. And it ends with a catastrophe. Laughter, apparently, is an expression of delight or of beauty-I don't agree. Laughter is a matter of relief. It works this way in all languages: in German you laugh yourself to death, in English you laugh your head off--that doesn't sound very funny to me."⁶⁷ In that sense, laughter comes from the desire to alleviate pain. Laughter functions as relief, especially when one is faced with the darkest of realities. More importantly, however, there is a sense of impending catastrophe about humor, or more precisely, about the nature of the joke. This sense of catastrophe, Tabori argues, comes from its necessity. A joke is necessary, or the world would explode from the always impending catastrophe that is life.⁶⁸ A joke both suspends the imminent catastrophe and substitutes it. In that sense, a joke, and laughter, are not an escape from reality, but they become reality. The catastrophes in life are one's reality, so Tabori argues, and jokes and laughter offer a mechanism to deal with this

⁶⁶ Kässens, *Der Spielmacher*, 120.

⁶⁷ Kässens, *Der Spielmacher*, 136.

⁶⁸ Kässens, *Der Spielmacher*, 62.

reality.⁶⁹ One must laugh because one doesn't know how else to help oneself. In the face of something horrible, one cannot speak, one cannot cry, but one feels that inevitable laugh moving upwards, through oneself, and one has no control. Laughter overthrows any sense of control one might want to have, it overwhelms one.⁷⁰ It is, in that respect, a serious matter. For Tabori, laughter and jokes are very serious.⁷¹ Tabori's Auschwitz-joke is, in that way, not tactless, but it embodies the catastrophic nature of our reality. In the following chapters, I will expand on how Tabori works humor into his Holocaust plays *Mein Kampf*, *My Mother's Courage*, and *The Cannibals*, and how these works fit into his "Theater der Peinlichkeit." More importantly, I will explore how Tabori's use of humor upsets the victim-perpetrator relationship on stage, and the audience's expectations about feelings such as guilt and shame, two extremely vital aspects of his work.

⁶⁹ Kässens, *Der Spielmacher*, 62.

⁷⁰ Kässens, *Der Spielmacher*, 62.

⁷¹ Tabori, *Bett & Bühne*, 159.



Tabori's *Mein Kampf*

In *Mein Kampf*, a young Hitler, hoping to be admitted to the Viennese Art Institute, comes to stay at a boarding house where he encounters Schlomo Herzl, a Jewish Bible-seller. Throughout the play, the two develop an intense relationship that is riddled with Hitler's increasing adoption of fascist views. Schlomo fails to remove himself from this injurious relationship with the future death sentence of the Jewish people, and so himself. In *Mein Kampf*, as in *My Mother's Courage* and *The Cannibals*, Tabori's humor is ironically morbid, and often breaks basic "taboos" of how the Holocaust should be treated. In the average audience's mind, humor and the Holocaust are quite possibly exclusive from one another. In Tabori's mind, they are intertwined. As mentioned earlier, he finds humor to be an appropriate way to express pain. True humor is based on the pain of humanity,⁷² and humanity is made up of all mankind, friends and foes. In the case of *Mein Kampf*, the friends and foes are Hitler and Schlomo. Hitler and Schlomo, in their twisted, co-dependent relationship, represent the morbid humor of mankind's misfortune: we are all bound together in an eternal hate-love relationship. The mere fact that Schlomo encourages Hitler to move into politics, thus promoting his own death, is painfully funny.⁷³

⁷² Tabori, *Bett & Bühne*, 156-157.

⁷³ Guerrero, *George Tabori im Spiegel*, 146.

Tabori extends his macabre humor into Hitler and Schlomo's use of language. Schlomo's use of language differs from Hitler's in that Schlomo utilizes "the joke" as his weapon. Jokes, especially jokes alluding to Jewish history and misery, are his verbal weapon of choice.⁷⁴

HERZL: [*Places a rabbinical hand upon HITLER's skull*]: Man's delight does delight God, in small doses.

HITLER: [*Whispers wetly*]: One summer's day, in Braunau-on-the-Inn, I saw a woman lying by the river Inn. She was drying her naked backside, her udders swinging in the breeze. She lifted a leg and I saw her center, and it was dark like the night. What's your opinion of the night?

HERZL: The night, one of two possibilities. It comes and goes, the night. A sting in the side is God's figure in the night, which is God's time, a time to love, a time to die. When you are old, you prefer the day.⁷⁵

Hitler, on the other hand, attempts to expel any sort of joke or humorous discourse from his language. He does not understand jokes, for one thing, and looks down at anyone who makes them. Instead, he pursues a sense of serious grandeur in his language; he tries to make every sentence monumental and important. In Act II, Hitler attempts to utilize Shakespeare's magnitude to reject Schlomo's attempt at humorous conversation by saying, "To quote Shakespeare, 'Where have you been?'" Schlomo immediately retaliates with "'Here,' to quote Shakespeare."⁷⁶ Here, Tabori seems to be alluding to the

⁷⁴ Guerrero, *George Tabori im Spiegel*, 148.

⁷⁵ George Tabori, "Mein Kampf," *Germany*, ed. Carl Weber (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 58.

⁷⁶ Weber, *Germany*, 72.

“German Misere” of “anti-emotionalism”.⁷⁷ Hitler rejects, or does not understand, the concept of humor. He states, “I can’t understand jokes. I keep forgetting the punch line. But then, I must admit I prefer profundities, the earnest poise. Life, after all, is a very serious matter.” Schlomo responds with “No kidding.” This kind of back and forth between Hitler and Schlomo continues throughout the play, until Hitler fully takes on his role of the dictator. Hitler tries to push Schlomo and his humor away with somber, and rather ridiculous determination, and Schlomo refuses to let such humorless interactions with a younger, naïve anti-Semite take the upper hand. By having Schlomo and Hitler embrace such extremes of language, Tabori has created the perfect stage for his provocative and macabre humor. By creating two characters who are constantly trying to trump the other’s verbal proficiency, he destroys any possible safe space for verbal agreement. Agreement, or acceptance, both within and outside the play, would negate Tabori’s point: in order to live and to deal with ourselves and our past, we must provoke ourselves, challenge ourselves constantly, preferably through humor. Thus, Tabori encourages disagreement wherever he can. Schlomo and Hitler negotiate this disagreement through language. When Hitler first introduces himself to Schlomo, Schlomo’s response is “Funny, you don’t look Jewish.”⁷⁸ This answer, in no obvious way meant as a joke by Schlomo, is the first of many ways in which Tabori interplays the immediate circumstance of Hitler’s historical infamy with his strangely comedic personality in the play’s reality. In this case, Schlomo is referring to the etymological background of the name Hitler, which, he states, originated in the form of “Schüttler”

⁷⁷ Tabori, *Bett & Bühne*, 116.

⁷⁸ Weber, *Germany*, 49.

from Odessa, a birth place of many Jews.⁷⁹ The basic fact that Schlomo brings Hitler, of all people, into connection with anything Jewish, is funny because, once again, two extremes are brought together. Tabori's humor, just as his "Theater der Peinlichkeit," rests on bringing juxtaposing extremes together: extremes of language, character, and circumstance.

Within Tabori's use of extremes comes his search for commonalities, and more importantly, within the nature of the joke, or humor. Schlomo, for example, reprimands Hitler:

This last week you have been developing some of the worst habits of both Germans and Jews. You think too much, mostly rubbish. You whine and wheedle, you speculate, you theorize, you prophesize, you onanize, you polarize, it's always either/or with you, forgetting that the tossed coin may fall not only head or tail but stay in midair.⁸⁰

Here, by having Schlomo depict the apparently different characteristics of Jews and Germans as culminated in the single person of the future murderer Hitler, Tabori humorously but sharply ridicules these so-called differences. Additionally, the fact that Schlomo has to rebuke his future perpetrator about the bad habits of Jews and Germans, immediately increases the omnipresent ambiguity in the room. Here, Tabori also realizes one of the main points of his "Theater der Peinlichkeit." Hitler, a historically "bad" guy, is shown in all of his ridiculousness. Hitler is completely incompetent and Schlomo, his Jew, is the clever one. Tabori reverses the power relationships to extend his humor into such extreme characters as Hitler. Hitler can't keep up with Schlomo and constantly makes a fool of himself, which might come as a relief to the

⁷⁹ Weber, *Germany*, 49-50.

⁸⁰ Weber, *Germany*, 72.

audience: finally they can laugh about Hitler. But the fact that throughout the play, Schlomo empowers Hitler to become a murderer ironically overshadows this “game” of ridiculing Hitler. In that sense, Tabori, aesthetically speaking, breaks down the historical prejudice of Hitler’s character only to rebuild it in an even stronger way. The audience is effectively left to deal with the macabre and foreboding comedy of the situation. In theory, the audience must decide who is right and wrong in this scenario, and who the victim and who the perpetrator is. Is Schlomo walking to his own death by taking on such a parental role and by attempting to teach Hitler life lessons, or is Hitler the bad guy despite his incompetence? Who should the audience sympathize with? Should it take sides at all? Very likely, the audience will not be able to come to any conclusions, as taking any side would place some sort of guilt, followed by shame, on them. Potentially caught in their desire to leave or to cry, they might find it easiest and hardest to laugh. Tabori refuses to guide them, leaving them to laugh in their failure to come to conclusions. In fact, he removes all possibility of conclusions from his work. Tabori plays with the ambiguity of a joke, in other words, he does not decide for the audience whether the use of humor illuminates something good or something bad, something uniting or separating.⁸¹ In Schlomo and Hitler’s case, he makes sure to suspend the “answer” about whether Schlomo or Hitler, or even more so, whether the Jew or his future murderer is winning. He does, however, make sure to maintain the impending destiny looming over Schlomo and Hitler’s co-dependent relationship. It is as if the audience is left in a spotlight that leaves it hyper-aware of the fact that this “marriage” cannot last, and will end in bloodshed. This unrelenting foreshadowing once again illustrates Tabori’s idea that humor, the Jewish people, and the German people are forever connected. Tabori will let the audience laugh, but at a price. They must admit to knowing the characters’ tragic endings:

⁸¹ Guerrero, *George Tabori im Spiegel*, 148.

Hitler will become a murderer and Schlomo will become his victim. He suspends the audience's emotional and mental consciousness by letting them, even making them laugh because they know not what to do, think, or feel. This continuous act of suspension feeds Tabori's use of humor, and thus his "Theater der Peinlichkeit". His humor is comi-tragic in nature: laughter and pain, and in Schlomo and Hitler's case, fortune and misfortune, are inextricably linked. There is no solution for the characters, but they must take some sort of action. This same comi-tragic circumstance exists for Tabori's audience: they know not what to conclude, and so they must laugh.

7

Tabori's *My Mother's Courage*

My Mother's Courage is based on the true story of Tabori's mother narrowly escaping deportation to Auschwitz. In the play, an acquaintance and fellow deportee, Kemelen, forces her to go to the Nazi managing the deportation, and ask him to be released on the grounds that she has a Red Cross Pass and shouldn't be there. Despite not having it on her, she is miraculously let go. She then has a very strange train ride with the Nazi that saved her life. In *My Mother's Courage*, as in *Mein Kampf*, Tabori creates a story which combines comi-tragic humor of extremes with the haunting circumstances of the Holocaust. He once again creates a painfully comedic array of characters that exist of and have to exist in moments of extremes. In the first scene, for example, Tabori's mother Elsa, whilst on her way to play bridge with her sister, is stopped by two elderly, sickly men with whom she is fairly well acquainted. They tell her that she must come with them to be deported. Always a conscientious, neighborly lady, she follows these two decrepit old men without thinking twice. Here, Tabori's morbid humor comes in. To start with, Elsa's open-hearted naiveté leads her to lend a helping hand to her potential executioners when they must stop because of various health issues such as asthma attacks or bad hips.⁸² What is even more ridiculous and incredible is the fact that, when suddenly alone on a over-filled tram, with the two elderly men calling after her to get off at the next stop, and when handed a free ticket to the final station, instead of escaping, Elsa does as told and gets off the

⁸² George Tabori, *My Mother's Courage*, (The Yale School of Drama/Yale Repertory Theatre, 1999), 4.

tram to meet her personal policemen.⁸³ These moments themselves are painfully funny in that the audience, whilst laughing, is fully aware of the fact that every one of the mother's actions, or non-actions, is bringing her inevitably closer to her own murder. With these comi-tragic moments, Tabori, once again, thrusts the audience into a space of conundrum and indecision. How should the audience reconcile the mother's almost blind good-heartedness with the fact that exactly this quality will lead her to her death?

Tabori successfully upholds this space of moral and emotional confusion throughout the play. As mentioned before, his characters are made up of extremes. The Nazi, for instance, who eventually saves the mother's life but is responsible for the death of the other 4000 Jews on that sunny Sunday in 1944, is a vegetarian. On their train trip back to Budapest, he goes on an extensive rant about how he cannot bear to think of an innocent animal being butchered. He exclaims, "Now how could anyone stoop so low, I said to myself, as to butcher a calf, chop it up and eat it? (...) Of course, one ought to go even farther. Does a plum feel pain as one chews it?"⁸⁴ He is the butcher of humans, and he is lecturing one of his potential victims about butchering animals. Here, Tabori blurs the lines of morality once more. For one thing, this Nazi is clearly a human, and a philosopher, and yet he is murderer. Even more so, Tabori's mother, as well as Tabori, cannot but love this murderer for what he did this lovely day in spring, which was to save Elsa Tabori from death. This interaction between Elsa Tabori and her Nazi exists in a space in which everything and nothing makes sense. Tabori's audience is forced to enter a space in which labels of victim and perpetrator have become distorted, and in which laughter in light of the imminent horror of the Holocaust doesn't necessarily seem inappropriate anymore. In fact, laughter seems to be one of the only options left. In this way, Tabori has once again involved the

⁸³ Tabori, *My Mother's Courage*, 6.

⁸⁴ Tabori, *My Mother's Courage*, 19.

entire audience in a circle in which hate and love, guilt and shame, lose conclusive meaning. We as the audience can no longer choose what to feel or how to react. Instead, we are all bound together through the tragi-comedy in front of us, and in us. We are bound together through theater.

As in *Mein Kampf*, Tabori utilizes the craft of language in *My Mother's Courage* in order to interplay the banalities of everyday life with the impending doom of destruction. Whilst in the cattle car, for example, he inter-mixes the banality of conversation with the looming death sentence of those in therein. Complaints such as "Would whoever has his elbow in my solar plexus please remove it?"⁸⁵, questions such "Any objections if I smoke?"⁸⁶, and reprimands such as "Some God you are! Where were you this morning when they broke my glasses? Out for a snack? Taking a nap? Well, I'm through with you, boy! Do me a favor and choose some other different people next time!"⁸⁷ are intermixed with narrative descriptions such as

Yes, but the rays of sun between the loose planks lit up a few human parts, as if the deportees had already been dismembered: a hat, a hand, a hooked nose, a pair of wet eyes, fluttering hair, all of it belonging to different people, yet embodied by a single mutilated giant. As the train had settled down to an even trot and the foul air was freshened up by a country breeze, this fairly unison breathing changed to a different kind of gasping. 'Coughs and sneezes spread diseases,' someone remarked humorously and was rewarded by a giggle, which conjured up the atmosphere of a children's room at night, with the children enjoying furtive jokes under the covers while the grown-ups danced above. A fairy tale, and no one would be saved from getting baked in the oven, except for one.⁸⁸

Here, the banal has become absurd, and almost horrifically so. By taking the comedy of everyday life and combining it with the all-too-close notion of death, Tabori has once again

⁸⁵ Tabori, *My Mother's Courage*, 9.

⁸⁶ Tabori, *My Mother's Courage*, 9.

⁸⁷ Tabori, *My Mother's Courage*, 9.

⁸⁸ Tabori, *My Mother's Courage*, 9.

thrown the audience into a ring of emotional and moral lack of clarity. The audience cannot help but be hyper-aware that on the one hand, they want to laugh at the banalities of these complaints, but that on the other hand, this is no laughing matter. These people are going to their deaths. And in the face of this comi-tragic absurdity, Tabori returns to his mantra: laughing is crying. Pain and humor become one in Tabori's "Theater der Peinlichkeit." In this case, the German phrase, "das Lachen bleibt einem im Halse stecken" or "the laughter gets stuck in one's throat" applies. The audience's first reaction is to laugh, but their consciousness weighs down on this laugh, stopping it half-way. This laugh stopped half-way is painful.

An important aspect of *My Mother's Courage*, as hinted at in the previous section, is Tabori's re-appropriation of the Brechtian "Verfremdungseffekt" or "alienation effect" to serve his "Theater der Peinlichkeit". He actively and relentlessly upsets the audiences' assumptions of what to expect of the characters and their circumstances. In *My Mother's Courage*, he destroys his audience's expectations in three different ways. These are the sporadic removal of the fourth wall, the sudden relinquishing of the audience's emotional property and control, and the disruption of the audience's rudimentary moral understanding of shame and guilt.

In the first kind of destruction, the sporadic removal of the fourth wall, Tabori plays with the Brechtian "Verfremdungseffekt", or "alienation effect". This effect, as Brecht explains in his essay "Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction," involves the breaking down of the fourth wall so that the audience is "no longer in any way allowed to submit to an experience uncritically (and without practical consequences) by means of simple empathy with the characters in a play."⁸⁹ In other words, the audience is no longer permitted to sink back into their plush seats,

⁸⁹ Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, ed. and trans. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 71.

enjoy the show, have a cathartic experience, and then leave the theater feeling satisfied and unchanged. Brecht wants the audience to feel a need to observe, not necessarily without feeling, and recognize what is happening on stage as something that they have a part in, intellectually, emotionally, but most importantly, critically. To Brecht's optimal audience, theater is pleasure and instruction. To Tabori's optimal audience, theater is pleasure and a medium to consciously grieve for and remember what may be extremely painful and difficult to remember and grieve for. In Tabori's eyes, this optimal audience, in this case the German audience, does not yet exist because it has not learned to mourn its own past. It is still stuck in the stage of repression of feeling. In an attempt to bring forth this ability to feel and express, Tabori takes Brecht's "alienation effect" and applies it to the audience's preconceived notions of its involvement in the play. He intermittently removes the fourth wall, thus destabilizing the play's reality and the audience's understanding of its role. In *My Mother's Courage*, Tabori places the story in three different temporal spheres. The first sphere consists of the son, who is also the narrator, speaking to the audience. The second sphere is a more liminal space that involves the mother her reality and conversing with her son, who is speaking from an external, narratory place. Thirdly, the mother periodically retreats into the reality of the actual story as it happened during the war when her son, the narrator, was still a young boy as opposed to the grown man he is now. Returning to the cattle car scene, Tabori confronts the audience with banal complaints and interactions within the story as well as the son's descriptive interjective hints at how tragic this scene is.⁹⁰ In combining these three temporal spheres, Tabori pushes the audience to move in and out of the present space with the narrator, a liminal tense with the narrator and his mother from a past time, as well as the past tense of the actual story. He breaks up time and thus the reality that

⁹⁰Tabori, *My Mother's Courage*, 9.

the audience was expecting to dive into and remain in. This way, the audience members are forced to forgo the chance to overindulge in the mother's touching, piercingly humorous, and most importantly, thrilling story. They cannot isolate themselves from the narrator's direct address to them ; they must give up the safety of the fourth wall, whether they like it or not. Especially by allowing the mother to directly interact with her grown son, the narrator, before returning back to the reality of her story, Tabori disrupts the audiences' expectations of theatrical fluidity.

In the second kind of destruction, Tabori strives to destroy the audience's emotional property and control. In other words, he strives to break down the audience's ability to negotiate how it reacts to what is happening on stage. More importantly however, as mentioned above, he wants to influence its ability to freely react emotionally. In a way, it seems that he wants the audience to feel whatever it needs to feel and to be aware of this feeling. However, this awareness is not required to be a critical deconstruction of why the audience is experiencing emotional upheaval until after the show. Tabori is aware of the fact that "Vergangenheitsbewältigung," or the process of mourning, cannot take place in the course of one night at the theater, but that it can possibly begin there. In that way, he aims for two kinds of awareness: the audience member's awareness during the play that he is feeling upsetting and confusing emotions that he may not be able to decipher at the moment, and the audience member's awareness after the play about what might have triggered these overwhelming emotions and where they might have come from. The immediate pain might lead to laughter substituting for crying, but it is this laughter that will hopefully provide access to pain. The comi-tragic interactions between the mother and her Nazi hopefully create a space of emotional and

moral confusion that later translates into emotional and moral clarity.⁹¹ For Tabori, first comes the emotional experience and then comes the decipherment of the emotional experience.

Tabori's third kind of destruction, the disruption of the audience's rudimentary moral understanding of guilt and shame, has to do with Tabori's confusing of the victim-perpetrator relationship on stage. For example, Elsa inhabits the role of the victim for the first part of the play when the two elderly policemen arrest her to be deported to a concentration camp. Then she suddenly adopts a liminal role of betrayal towards all the other victims, in this case Jews waiting for deportation, when she is physically pushed into persuading the operating officer to release her. In this scene, her acquaintance and fellow deportee throws her back out into the courtyard where selections are being held. There, in front all of the other deportees, Elsa, a very timid and proper woman, must go up to the officer and interact with him.⁹² This "betrayal" automatically excludes her from the group of helpless victims but does not make her a perpetrator either. She is thrown into an indentificative limbo, not knowing which role to take on. She wants to live but does not know how to ask for this without betraying the other "victims". Kemelen then forces her to make this decision, in her case the decision to live. According to Guerrero, this forced decision to be courageous and ask for her life "expresses the implacability of the choice to live. The guilt of the living as the guilt of the dead is not to be erased. In this guilt, man stands naked in a double sense: naked before the others and naked in his own desirousness".⁹³ Here, the audience can no longer fulfill the easy task of categorizing the play's characters into "good" or "bad", or "victim" or "perpetrator". They may feel empathy for the mother, but this sudden hope for her individual life cannot go hand in hand with their immediate knowledge that all of the

⁹¹ Tabori, *Bett & Bühne*, 157.

⁹² Tabori, *My Mother's Courage*, 15.

⁹³ Guerrero, *George Tabori im Spiegel*, 127.

other “victims” will die. In this way, they are pulled into limbo along with the mother. The moral judgments they might have made before the mother’s forced choice to be courageous and ask for her life are now completely insupportable by their new knowledge that one might live but the rest will suffer and die. Tabori forbids his audience the opportunity to remain within their safety zone of what is morally acceptable to them before and after the play.

By creating comi-tragic characters and circumstances of extremes, Tabori himself is perhaps taking on the role of the tormentor. He is, however, a tormentor with a sense of humor. Within this humor lies a sincere belief that conclusion is not possible, and that it is part of being alive. We strive forever to draw a conclusion about ourselves, and our circumstances, but we will never get there. We live in the pain of never being able to conclude. We can, however, come together in our failure to conclude, and laugh about it.



Tabori's *The Cannibals*

In *The Cannibals*, Tabori brings together role-play and multi-layered realities to create an almost absurdist space of extreme characters and circumstances. For one thing, he places 12 concentration camp inmates in the reality of a concentration camp. The obvious story is that of the fat inmate Puffi, after being killed for eating a piece of bread, being prepared for dinner by his fellow inmates, and Uncle, another inmate, protesting. Towards the end of the play, a Nazi and his Kapo come in for an inspection, send all of the inmates but two to the gas chambers, and then end the play by unknowingly eating Puffi. The more complex parts of the story are the fact that Tabori has added various realities on top of this reality. Heltai and Hirschler, for instance, are the two surviving inmates. In the play, they inhabit two very specific realities. On the one side, they speak to the audience as the older Hirschler and Heltai, dressed in suits and living in America, recounting the events of that fateful night in Block Six in which Puffi was cooked.⁹⁴ On the other side, they inhabit themselves as they were on that night in Block Six.⁹⁵ In other words, Hirschler and Heltai exist in the reality of the play as well as in the liminal space past the fourth wall. They act as external narrators and internal participants in their story.

Most of the other characters also reside in multiple realities. Uncle, for instance, acts both within as well as outside of the story. He, like some of the other characters, transcend the fourth wall to speak of their characters in third person, either the story of how they came to Block Six

⁹⁴ George Tabori, "The Cannibals," *The Theatre of the Holocaust*, ed. Robert Skloot (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), 202.

⁹⁵ Skloot, *The Theatre of the Holocaust*, 209.

or how they felt at a specific moment in the story. Uncle, for example, after loudly protesting against Puffi being made into a meal, turns to the audience to say, “He was shaking with indignation.”⁹⁶ On the next line, he returns once again behind the fourth wall.⁹⁷ Here, Tabori, brings in his use of extremes to create a rupture in the audience’s reception of the play. He interrupts the audience’s individual focus on the story line by aligning Uncle’s perspective of the story with the audience’s perspective. Uncle, on a strange liminal level, becomes part of the audience by relating out loud his character’s physical sensation. In that way, he seems to be both offering the audience a more intimate perspective of what is happening on stage and removing them from it by stating something that is perhaps obvious. The audience has no choice but to be Uncle’s confidante and painfully objective observer at once. It cannot follow the emotional train of the story, but must react to the characters interrupting it at any time. Tabori takes and gives emotional and narrative agency to the characters and the audience as he chooses. In a certain sense, he places them on the same playing field. The audience and characters are now on the same team. Tabori has, in effect, thrown a retractable fourth wall at them. And he retracts it at will.

Tabori pursues this idea, or vehicle, of retractable agency, through his use of language and role play. In other words, he once again plays with extremes and how they can influence the audience’s reaction. These extremes, in return, help illuminate Tabori’s morbid humor, which in this case, has become completely absurd. For one thing, the inmates create a spoken reality in which language depicts the sanity as well as the insanity of their situation. They have wild conversations about things that in a less extreme situation would have nothing to do with one

⁹⁶ Skloot, *The Theatre of the Holocaust*, 204.

⁹⁷ Skloot, *The Theatre of the Holocaust*, 204.

another. For example, the inmates demonstrate their hunger and their obsession with food by reciting delicious recipes of how to prepare “eight lamb kidneys.”⁹⁸ These are intertwined with how they want to prepare dead Puffi for dinner. The inmates reminisce about foods they used to prepare before Block Six. They have now, however, translated the mouth-watering nostalgia into a grueling, but all too real desire to prepare Puffi in the best way possible. They have merged their desperate desire to stay alive with their happiest memories. In other words, they have fused two extremes and created an absurd reality in which the two extremes are one.

In a similar way, Uncle combines his immediate protest at the others motion to eat Puffi with frequent religious references. Whilst disagreeing with Puffi’s meal-making potential, he weaves in and out of religious proclamations. When the others applaud and cheer after inmate Weiss’ recitation of the lamb kidney recipe, he responds with “You shall eat; you shall eat not one day nor two days nor twenty days but a whole month until it comes out of your nostrils and be loathsome to you, because you rejected the Lord who is among you.”⁹⁹ Like the other inmates combine their hunger with their ridiculous delivery of recipes, Uncle combines his indignation with religion. In a sense, both Uncle and the others are combining the sanity of their old lives when religion and food were part of their everyday lives with their immediate will to survive their horrific reality. By combining these two extremes, Tabori sets up an almost incomprehensible sphere in which insanity has become sanity. The characters exchanges are laughable and grueling at once; as they speak of lamb kidneys, they are preparing a dead man’s body for dinner, and as they are cannibals, they are at once children playing. Their entire reality seems like a comically grotesque game. At some point, for example, Uncle begins to speak to God, complaining about the fact that God is not helping him handle this atrocious situation.

⁹⁸ Skloot, *The Theatre of the Holocaust*, 210.

⁹⁹ Skloot, *The Theatre of the Holocaust*, 210.

Uncle's indignation is strangely funny. He is an inmate at a concentration camp, yelling at God for not taking his responsibilities as creator seriously. At some point he exclaims, "I want none of it. I still have my pride in this mud, this wilderness, this city of murder, this Auschwitz. All I want is a little information, no, I insist on it. I want to know why this ending."¹⁰⁰ This exchange alone is comi-tragic in that Tabori, through the character of Uncle, is presenting the audience with the immediate reality of the concentration camp in form of a religious comical debate. The audience cannot ignore the fact that, however ridiculous Uncle's complaints to his God "up there" might sound, they ring all too true. Uncle is in Auschwitz for no good reason other than that he is part of a certain religion. And this religion will inevitably bring him to his death.

Tabori intensifies this sense of the characters playing a disturbing game on stage by including frequent role play. When Uncle complains to God, for example, the other inmates respond immediately by climbing on top of a large mountain of left over clothes to form an enormous God-figure.¹⁰¹ Here, Tabori once again presents us with a comically macabre moment. The clothes belong to those who have been sent to the gas chambers. Ironically, this heap of clothes has become the location for the inmates' strange God formation. They are building their playful pyramid on the grounds of annihilation. At the end of this scenario, Uncle knocks over the God figure and laughs loudly as his fellow inmate Weiss gaily hums a waltz to himself and drops pieces of meat into the pot with blood-stained hands. Uncle immediately stops laughing and runs out of the room.¹⁰² Here, Tabori confronts the audience with a moment that perfectly expresses the essence of *The Cannibals*, but even more so, of his "Theater der Peinlichkeit". The characters on stage are wildly laughing, but it is as if they are crying. Their laughter only adds to

¹⁰⁰ Skloot, *The Theatre of the Holocaust*, 215.

¹⁰¹ Skloot, *The Theatre of the Holocaust*, 214.

¹⁰² Skloot, *The Theatre of the Holocaust*, 217.

the pain and the absurdity of the fact that they are hyper-aware of their potential deaths. In that sense, they are expressing their pain through laughter, and the audience is left with the responsibility of emotionally and mentally negotiating this painfully funny marriage of pain and humor. They might do the same thing as the characters: laugh their pain away for the moment because they cannot come to any conclusion about how to manage their experiences. The audience cannot solve this comi-tragic moment of laughter and death, and thus, laughs.

Another kind of agency that Tabori plays with is that of judgment. For one thing, he has, more blatantly than ever, skewed the victim-perpetrator roles on stage. On an obvious level, the inmates of the concentration camp have become the perpetrators by preparing their fellow inmate for dinner. Tabori then skews this simple plot line. Foremost, the inmates themselves cannot exclude the possibility of their own imminent deaths. For all they know, they will be sent to the gas chambers at any moment. Does this make them temporary perpetrators? They could be full-blown victims again at any moment. Additionally, Tabori adds to the plot line the moment when they all do sit down to eat Puffi, and suddenly find they cannot eat a human being. Therefore, they cannot be cannibals.¹⁰³ Instead, the Nazi Schrekinger enters and unknowingly orders that the meal be served. He then sends all of the inmates but Hirschler and Heltai to the gas chambers with the order to “eat,”¹⁰⁴ and then proceeds to eat Puffi himself.¹⁰⁵ The Nazi unknowingly eats the Jew who was prepared by other Jews. Who is now the perpetrator? Tabori has moved the characters in and out of the customary “perpetrator” and “victim” roles so many times that the audience cannot distinguish between right and wrong anymore. Who should they empathize with? Can they empathize at all? They cannot fall back into their usual way of sorting out the

¹⁰³ Skloot, *The Theatre of the Holocaust*, 247.

¹⁰⁴ Skloot, *The Theatre of the Holocaust*, 259.

¹⁰⁵ Skloot, *The Theatre of the Holocaust*, 265.

good from the bad because these labels can no longer stand by themselves. Similarly, Tabori refuses to set straightforward boundaries about how feelings of guilt should be managed by the audience. For one thing, his characters, be they victims or not, are guilty in some way. No one in *The Cannibals* is morally sound. Even Uncle asks whether there is a piece of dead Puffi's bread left, this way placing himself in the liminal zone of moral duality.¹⁰⁶ Hirschler and Heltai depict their own inconclusive feelings of guilt when they narrate to the audience as their older selves. Hirschler, at some point, cannot remember that Weiss was the cook that night, to which Heltai responds, "You must be sleeping well."¹⁰⁷ Hirschler then answers, "Listen, what d'you want me to do, become a vegetarian? Those that have suffered don't want to suffer any more. (...) Okay, I can't stand certain dishes. The other night, in that Spanish joint on MacDougal Street, I had this pig roast."¹⁰⁸ This exchange between Heltai and Hirschler both intimate the possibility that they feel guilty for surviving as well as the desire to not feel guilty anymore. Their squabble is tragically comical in that they are two old men who hassle one another about how well they remember this tragic night on which they alone survived, while the dead are standing right next to them. Once again, how is the audience to manage this strange situation? How do they manage Heltai and Hirschler's talk about guilt and shame in relation to their own immediate feelings? How do they manage the innate tragedy of this comical moment? They cannot compartmentalize Hirschler or Heltai, or any of the other characters into the categories of "good" or "bad," "victim" or "perpetrator," or "guilty" or "not guilty."

To Tabori, there seems to be no conventionally appropriate response to something as painfully comical as *Mein Kampf*, *My Mother's Courage*, or *The Cannibals* for that matter. The

¹⁰⁶ Skloot, *The Theatre of the Holocaust*, 204.

¹⁰⁷ Skloot, *The Theatre of the Holocaust*, 212.

¹⁰⁸ Skloot, *The Theatre of the Holocaust*, 213.

best response, to him, is the one that is conventionally most inappropriate, but the most honest. It is laughter.



Conclusion

I now return to the premiere of *The Cannibals* at the Schiller Theater in 1969. Bodies and tension have warmed the room.

THE LOUDSPEAKERS:

For which reason I recommend, dear bethren in Christ,
The Jew's heart, in aspic or with sauce vinaigrette,
So soft it will melt in your mouth.¹⁰⁹

It is the end. The curtain goes down. Silence. Suddenly, one by one, applause begins, echoing through the theater. Applause turns into standing ovations. Something has happened at this theater tonight. Tabori will not need his escape car to the airport. What has happened? What has this Hungarian playwright changed in his German audience?

Tabori came to a Germany that was in the midst of learning how to live again. After the atrocities of the Holocaust, Germany was, in many ways, dead. The mere guilt and shame of being part of a nation whose former government had initiated and pursued the annihilation of six million Jews left most of Germany with little grip on how to rebuild and nourish their nation culturally and socially. For many Germans that had experienced Hitler's Regime, even the thought of admitting to participation, or non-participation, during the Third Reich seemed

¹⁰⁹ Skloot, *The Theatre of the Holocaust*, 265.

impossible. Instead of dealing with the truth of one's role, and more importantly, the meaning of one's experiences during the Third Reich, many Germans found it easier to adopt a lifestyle of necessity, which included rebuilding the country economically and politically. The need to regain some sort of control all too often neglected the actual issue at hand: how were the German people going to deal with their past emotionally? How were they going to mourn their nation's recent history? Even more importantly, how were they to grieve and rejuvenate? How were they to find "Vergangenheitsbewältigung"?

With the advent of the 1950s and 60s, the post-war German generation, now largely teenagers and students, began questioning their parents' activity, or inactivity, during the war. These were questions that their parents often could not, or would not answer. As a response, a growing societal chasm between the older and younger generation began to form.¹¹⁰ The issue of mourning had expanded to two generations: much of the older generation had to learn how to mourn an event that they didn't know how to mourn; they knew how to feel shame and guilt, and how to deny. A large part of the younger generation was at a loss of how to deal with their largely inconclusive and ambiguous history: what was their role in Germany's history? Were they implicated, and if so, how? Both generations needed "Vergangenheitsbewältigung".

The "Bewältigungsdramen" broached this issue of "Vergangenheitsbewältigung" and of German cultural and social rejuvenation, but only with moderate success. These dramas that attempted to broach the issue of the Holocaust, including the American stage version of Anne Frank's diaries by Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett and Peter Weiss' *The Investigation* did not do the trick. At most, the German audience reacted with a "stunned silence"¹¹¹. What this

¹¹⁰ Judt, *Postwar*, 417.

¹¹¹ Huyssen, "The Politics of Identification", 123.

silence meant for Germany may never be known. However, below I will address what the standing ovations at George Tabori's *The Cannibals* meant for Germany.

How do Germany's need for "Vergangenheitsbewältigung" and Tabori's "Theater der Peinlichkeit" go together? What was it about his painfully funny plays about a youthful Hitler and his Jew, about Tabori's mother and her Nazi, and about eleven concentration camp inmates and their dead friend and meal Puffi that incited the German public to standing ovations?

Tabori's "Theater der Peinlichkeit" is made up of extremes. His characters and their circumstances come together from all ways of life to exist together in a theatrically liminal space. In this space one can no longer depend on extremes to distinguish between "right" and "wrong", or between "good" and "bad". Instead of definition, there exists only inconclusion. But it is what lays in this inconclusion, in this lack of an answer, which triumphs in the end. It is the dialogue that the audience is forced to start, and hopefully sustain, with themselves. Confronted with Tabori's distorted world where extremes have amalgamated and consolidated, the audience can no longer control its own journey. It must sit in the midst of liminal realities and characters. It must sit there with the necessity of laughter and the imminent knowledge of death. It must sit there and let theater, there in front of them, enter their stomachs and hearts, move upwards, pulsing and pounding within them, so that it may come out as a laugh. This laugh will hopefully turn into a thought, and a breath. This laugh will hopefully let Tabori's audience breathe again, like they used to, and make their bodies smell sweet like they used to.¹¹²

By bringing *The Cannibals* to Berlin in 1969, I believe Tabori may have done humanity four very important favors. First, he gave the Germans a new chance, and a new option, to come alive again. Second, he found a home for his "Theater der Peinlichkeit." The Germans needed

¹¹² Tabori, *Bett & Bühne*, 46.

Tabori, and Tabori needed the Germans. Third, he proved to us that laughter and pain do go together and that if we can learn to live with this strange and often alienating idea, we will smell better, live better. Fourth, and most importantly, however, Tabori proved to us the necessity of art. He overcame Hitler, and himself, through art. In his strange ways, he took his pain, and his Hitler, and let the two flow into laughter. He let his pain and his laughter co-exist through theater, for himself, and hopefully, for his German audience. He did not look for a solution, but for a journey. This journey is comi-tragic in nature. We humans are comi-tragic in nature. I do not believe that this journey will end any time soon. But it must exist. This conversation must exist, and it must exist through theater. And through laughter.

Appendices

Appendix A.

Project Description

Adolf Presents "Degenerate Art": A Serious Evening, to be presented as a work-in-progress at the Old Gym in May 2012, is cabaret-esque evening during which a parodic version of Hitler presents so-called "*degenerate art*" to his audience. "*Degenerate art*," in this case, references art that the Nazis considered "bad" or "barbaric." These "degenerate" acts include a comparison of Hitler's own "generate" artwork with "degenerate" artwork by Kandinsky, Egon Schiele, and Franz Marc, as well as vaudeville act and jazz-chanson acts. Hitler, a childish, anally retentive choleric, attempts to prove his authority to the audience, but continuously finds himself to be the fool.

These acts, all comedic and absurdist in nature, are interjected with two dramatic monologues. These monologues are presented by two German women, Irmgard and Susanne. I will be playing both Hitler and Irmgard, the elderly German woman. Irmgard enters after Hitler is being seduced backstage by the "*degenerate*" Jazz singer. Irmgard comes thumping on, and, thinking she is at a seminar where she is meant to speak about the past, speaks to the audience about her experience of Hitler and the Third Reich. After her exit, the younger German woman Susanne enters, and thinking she is also at the seminar, relates to the audience the difficulties and extreme ambiguities of growing up in a post-war Germany where the older generation all too often refuses to speak their activities, or in-activities, under Hitler. Both of these monologues are serious, and present a very different Hitler than the one the audience has recently met. This Hitler is the one we have read about in history books, and he is unforgiving and fanatic about his vision of creating a new, better Germany.

Susanne is interrupted by a disheveled Hitler covered in lipstick, with his mustache on his cheek. After a German screaming match about who is allowed to be sitting on Hitler's precious chaise chair, Susanne stomps off, and Hitler brings on his friend and rival dictator, Mussolini. After a short power struggle à la Charlie Chaplin's "The Great Dictator," Mussolini and Hitler present a short Leni Riefenstahl-style movie clip of what they consider to be "generate" art. This clip involves them standing on monuments, peering into the distance. It is very serious business. This clip is cut short when an unexpected video of Hitler dancing to Jazz, or "degenerate" music, is shown. Mussolini breaks up with Hitler over this "betrayal," and stomps off, with a distressed Hitler running after him. The show ends with the audience alone in the theater. For this production, a talk-back will follow the performance.

As a German-American born and raised in Berlin, *Adolf Presents "Degenerate Art": A Serious Evening* is meant to help me explore a major question: how do I negotiate my country's history and my part in this history as a third generation German? Within this framework, I investigate two vital elements: the comedic potential of an extremely important historical character and the role that storytelling plays in expressing the historical, emotional, and psychological remnants of a society. Based on Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* and George Tabori's *Mein Kampf*, I attempt to dissect the comedic potential and character idiosyncrasies of Hitler. The two monologues, based on first-hand accounts from my German mother and

grandmother, are meant to bring back a more serious perspective of Hitler and the traces his “Third Reich” left in German society. By intertwining a parodical Hitler with two dramatic monologues about him, I look to delve deeper into the comi-tragic aspects of history and of cultural heritage, and how laughter and pain are inextricably linked. What happens when you humanize a character who is all too often predicated by historical prejudice, through humor?

This piece is very much inspired by Tabori. Tabori finally presented to me a vehicle through which I can start a dialogue with the things that make me most uncomfortable: who I am within my country’s history, and who I want to be despite my country’s history.

Appendix B.

Artist Statement

As a German-American born and raised in Berlin, I have always harbored a healthy interest in history, more specifically my countries histories. Where do I come from? How intimate with the past do my nationalities make me? Starting adolescence, I have developed an increasing sense of the ambiguity and ambivalence that comes with national identity. Nowadays, I understand national identity as something that comes with bad days and good days. On the good days, we might not think much about our cultural heritage. On the bad days, we cannot stop thinking about where we come from. It is almost as if we all have a metaphorical “Hitler” in our minds. This metaphorical “Hitler” is made up of the things that make us most uncomfortable. In my case, my “personal Hitler” is made up of guilt and shame about my country’s history, and shame about being ashamed. I am not ashamed every day. But I have aware of my shame and want to live with it. I want to deal with it. As Tabori would a say, I want to “smell good.”

My “personal Hitler” is not omnipresent every day. On the good days, he is far, far away. On the bad days, he is breathing down my neck.

I wonder: how do we manage our “personal Hitlers”? How do we re-appropriate our “personal Hitlers”?

I want to negotiate my “personal Hitler” and my status as a third generation German-American through theater. Theater, I now realize, offers me the humor I need on the bad days. It presents me with a chance to explore the questions I have intensely, lovingly, but most importantly, freely. I want to start a dialogue between my good days and my bad days. I want to share this exploration with the audience, interactively and fleetingly, so that the moment when something suddenly makes sense isn’t ruined. In the end, I believe, it is those short, ephemeral moments in which pain and humor merge, naturally and trustingly, in which we can find our answers.

In the vein of creating ephemeral but rich, humorous but truthful theater, I am interested in immersive theater that focuses on fusing physical comedy and dramatic text, devised and adapted. I look to combine the serious with the humorous through intense improvisation and collaboration in the rehearsal space.

Appendix C.

Adolf Presents “Degenerate Art”: A Serious Evening

A work-in-progress by Leonie Bell

CHARACTERS:

ADOLF HITLER

BENITO MUSSOLINI

IRMGARD, in her 80s

SUSANNE, in her 40s

TWO WAITERS

3 SLAPSTICK PERFORMERS

1 JAZZ SINGER

(Note: All the waiters and performers will have some sort of arm band or recognizable symbol on top of their fancy clothing that marks them as prisoners. This symbol will not be realistic, but appropriate for the play’s reality. They are not there voluntarily. This part we will explore in rehearsal.)

A video comes on the screen, showing Leonie as her clown-self. (This part is meant to put the work-in-progress into context, to pose a larger question. For this performance of the work-in-progress there will be a talk-back after the performance.)

LEONIE AS CLOWN-SELF

Hello...I am Leonie. Hallo. I have a mother and a father and my mother and father have a mother and a father. I have questions. About me. Where do I come from? Who am I? I don’t know. I want to find out.

The video ends, suddenly the world the play begins. Lovely Viennese music is playing. A cabaret-esque atmosphere fills the room. Suddenly all quiets down, the lights dim. Silence. Nothing happens. Hitler pokes his head from the door upstage center, gestures at a waiter. The waiter runs to him. Then from back stage, German confusion, something about a “chaise”. The waiter comes back out, moves the chaise to where it’s supposed to be, goes and knocks on door, leaves. Monumental music comes on. The door opens, Hitler marches out as if walking to the altar. Extravagant bows. Awaits applause. Looks at waiters. They applaud, encourage audience to applaud.

HITLER

Thank you, thank you, thank you! Please! Please! PLEASE. HALLLOOOO.

Silence.

Welcome to Adolf's evening of "Degenerate Art", ladies and gentlemen. This is a very nice place you have here. America. AMERICA. You must all be very ...nice people. Very nice. But you are young. I come from Germany. Germany, you see, is not young. It is old, and wise. It knows. I have come tonight, to this place (*disdainfully gestures at theater*), to share with you some of this...knowledge. Knowledge about art. You see art is very important for life. But not all art is good. Much art is...worthless, detestable, a horrible mark upon this majestic earth!

Hitler takes a meaningful silence, flaring his nostrils.

I am here, at your service tonight, to present to you what is not to be presented. I present to you tonight the unpresentable of presentables! Degenerate Art! Ach! Degenerate art. I must tell you.

Degenerate Art. Oh, what a heart-ache. It is in some ways, like someone urinated on you. This is how I feel when I watch degenerate art. I am a clean, beautiful, white, marble board walk. And then a mangy, ratty, grungy dog comes, and urinates on me. This is how I feel when I watch degenerate art. Now, ladies and gentlemen, you must understand. This is not a joking matter. It a matter of utmost importance! You must expel all degenerate art from your life, from your psyche, from your bodies, or you will be dirty. And dirt. Is dirty. Do you know what I mean? DO YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN?

Hitler has become rather emotional.

Good. Now. The difference between real art. And degenerate art. You might not know.

Hitler snaps his fingers. The two waiters come running on, holding various paintings. One waiter holds a tooth brush and a cup of water and goes to stand next to Hitler. The screen turns on, a Kandinsky is shown.

Now, ladies and gentlemen, I used to do a little art myself and, well, I thought I might contribute a little. You see, I almost went to the Vienna Art Institute. But then I found my true calling. The art of politics. I never gave up my passion though.

Ladies and gentlemen, this is Kandinsky. *Hitler opens mouth. The waiter tentatively brushes his teeth.*

This is “The Rainbow at Dusk”. It’s one of my earlier works. *A waiter holds up a painting of a rainbow at dusk. It could’ve been painted by a child. Hitler is visibly proud.*

Next!

A Schiele comes up.

This is Egon Schiele. Particularly abhorrent. What woman looks like this.

This is “A Lady at Dusk”. *A waiter holds up a painting of a woman at dusk.*

Next!

A Franz Marc comes up.

This is Franz Marc. *The waiter has started to get annoying. Hitler grabs it from him, brushes his own teeth, starts lecturing the waiter about how to brush teeth.*

Don’t ever mention his name to me. We do not love him.

“The Horse at Dusk”. It’s one of my best works. *A waiter holds up a painting of a dog at dusk.*

This, ladies and gentlemen, is the difference between degenerate art, and real art.

Hitler bows, waiting for applause. The waiter start applauding, hinting at the audience.

Thank you, thank you, but now we must carry on.

Now we come to...how do I say. *Hitler starts becoming emotional. AGAIN.* The tragedy of my life.

A picture of Charlie Chaplin comes up on the screen.

Meet Chaplin, Charles Chaplin. You see, we used to be...well. Like this. *Hitler mimics hugging.* But now, we are...like this. *Hitler mimics a rather brutal death.*

I thought he was my friend. But he was NOT. Him and his stupid little mustache. THEY WERE NOT MY FRIENDS. NO. I was too trusting. BUT I HAVE LEARNED. His kind, they are bad. They are dirty. They are dirty dirt. The dirtiest of dirt. THEY ARE THIS.

Pause. One actor comes on. Hitler settles down on his chaise. Suddenly two others come on. Hitler shoots up.

WHAT. Who are you! I ordered one! Hello! Hellooo!

He gets up.

Marx Brother-esque routine with Hitler as fool follows. Finally they disappear. Hitler is left, exhausted on the chaise.

That, ladies and gentlemen, was degenerate...art.

Starts crying. Suddenly the band tunes in. A voice is heard. Hitler stops, his is mesmerized.

But...but it cannot be...this sound...this sound...is degenerate...

Hitler falls in love. The singer seduces him with her song. He goes completely gaga.

The singer starts gesturing for Hitler to follow her.

Hitler does an anally-retentive victory dance and disappears through the door upstage.

The band and waiters stand around awkwardly for a moment. Suddenly, an older lady storms on from SL.

IRMGARD

I'm so sorry, oh I'm so sorry! I got lost, and then that young man, he didn't know right from left either...ach, the youth...these days...

She stands still...out of breath. Looks at the audience. Sighs.

Well, where was I.

Sees Hitler's chaise, walks over.

Well this is strange, isn't it? Not something you'd expect at a seminar. Especially where you're supposed to talk about your past! Very strange! Kind of kitschy. Looks like something my son Bruno might have...he lives in Berlin, you know.

Well. (*Looks around, sees waiter, gestures at him.*) You, young man. You look strong, come over here and help me. These legs aren't as fit as they look any more. Come on now, we haven't got all day.

Waiter helps Irmgard onto chaise.

Much better. Okay. Thank you, darling. So nice of you to come today. You must have come to see the seminar, no? You know, you look a lot of like Maxi Schneider. But then again, I haven't seen Maxi Schneider in years, not since we went to that tea party together at the end of August 1939...then the war began. The war began and Maxi went to Russia. He didn't come back 'til 1950, he was in the camps in Russia. You know, the camps where they put prisoners of war...Just like my cousin Berthold. But Bertie died soon after he came home, of TB. I remember that...at least he got a proper funeral. The other boys didn't. They just died, somewhere in no-man's land. For what? For our country, our great Germany? For our "motherland"?

She looks at the audience.

You see. The war wasn't about us. The women. It wasn't about the *people!* But it certainly wasn't about the women. It was about them. The men. The powerful men. Always about them. But what was it about them? Why was it about them? Every Sunday, I sit in my armchair, and think. Why Hitler? Why him? All those love letters. All those women. Obsessed. You know, he made three women kill themselves. Two didn't know better. They wanted him and couldn't have him. And the third, well, she must have known nothing at all. She got him and then killed herself with him. For him...she should've stayed away, she should've. Far away. But of course, people didn't know that.

(pause.)

The "motherland". We were a motherland. Not just once the war started. Before. We were a land of mothers. So many mothers. Hitler's "mothers." When I was serving in the Reichsarbeitsdienst, that's was the service all German youth had to take part in...we young women would go stay with families for six months, families whose men were gone or who had a lot of children, and we would help them...you know, children, babies, that was what Hitler wanted. Lots of babies. Babies who would eventually help him take over Europe, starve all of Europe. Babies to help starve Europe. Ja. That was his plan. But yes, we would go help families in need. And this one time, I went to stay with a 12-headed-family. The woman had had 13 children. Three dead. Ten alive. I just remember, she had so many medals. She was at the end of her wits. With her many medals. She wasn't a woman, she was a machine. And you know, one day, she said to me "Irmgard. I can't do it anymore. I'm going to the doctors." The doctors, I thought! She was going to try to get an abortion. Abortions were highly illegal. But she went. And she told the doctor. "If you don't do this, I will throw myself on to the tracks." "Ich werf mich vor den Zug." And the doctor did it. Thank god. But that was war. It wasn't just out there. It was these poor women with their babies and their medals. And they didn't even know it. We didn't even know it. This Hitler. We didn't know. And then he was there. He didn't just go away. He stayed. He's still here. That's the worst about it. He's still here.

(Pause.)

It's time to go. Will you help me, young man? Oh you're so strong. Good for you.

She exits. As she exits, a middle-aged woman almost runs into her.

SUSANNE

I'm late, I'm late, I know! So sorry! So sorry! Stupid train, nothing is ever on time when you want it to be. Typical.

Okay, well. Germany. Germanygermanygermany. Germany. Growing up in post-war Germany? Growing up in post-war Germany! Always a good one.

Sits down on chaise. Thinks. Lights up.

My father. My father went to war. 18-years-old. Russia and France. Got shot in the head, came back early, fell in love with his childhood friend, studied medicine. All during the war. A lucky man. And an unlucky man. You see, he's dead now. But to this day...we don't know what happened to him. Over there. What he saw. Or...what he did. Whether he did anything. We don't know. But what happened over there was not good. It messed with him. The head wound messed with him. On the one hand, he was this doctor who helped immigrants, and that was a big deal then. But...on the other hand, he would get mad. So mad. These rage attacks. If one us did something he didn't like. And the only one who could control him was my mother. Once, he brought out the gun... *(hesitant.)* but that doesn't matter. What mattered was that there was a split. In him. In how he acted or didn't act. Spoke or didn't speak. When we would go hunting, I would listen to him talk with his war-buddies about the glory of the war. Always glorifying the war. Their heroic acts. And these other men, these friends, sounded like Nazis. They were Nazis. Old Nazis. But they only spoke like Nazis when they were alone. They forgot about me. There in the back, I found myself drifting away, far away from my father. And I was daddy's girl. But this was not the father I knew. Or wanted to know. It was not the country I wanted to know. I didn't know much then. But that. I did know. That was not my Germany.

(pause.)

Was my father a Nazi? I don't know. We all don't know. Last summer, my 17-year-old daughter spent hours researching the battalion he was in, trying to find out whether he "did anything bad". She never found out. Or hasn't yet. What would happen if she did? It might be a disaster. It might not. But the potential is always there. It shouldn't make her who she is, right? That's what I think. But in the end, only she can decide that. We'll see. All I know is that Hitler will not leave

her alone. Or any of us. We have good days and we have bad days. In terms of where we come from. All of us. You and me. And on the good days, Hitler isn't there. And on the bad days, he's there. He's right here. He's everywhere. How do we manage that?

At this point, Hitler exits from the door upstage. He is covered in lipstick, his mustache is completely askew, his shirt is poking out of his zipper. He sees SUSANNE on his chaise, freaks out, marches up to her.

HITLER

WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING?

SUSANNE

Excuse me, I'm talking here--

SUSANNE does a double take. It's Hitler, it can't be! But it is! And he looks crazy!

Are you? I mean...are you?

HITLER

I ASKED, WHAT ARE YOU DOING ON MY CHAISE? TELL MEEEE. NOW!
WHATAREYOU DOING ON MY CHAISE!

SUSANNE is now irritated.

SUSANNE

WELL EXCUSE ME. IHR CHAISE, was soll das denn heissen, IHR chaise! Das ist ein Stuhl, kein KIND. Tun Sie nicht so, als säße ich auf Ihrem Kind!

SUSANNE and HITLER start arguing in German. At some point, Susanne realizes the audience is still there, and whispers something to Hitler. This includes some insult. Hitler, angry, slowly pulls of his mis-placed mustache and puts it back on. Next SUSANNE, clearly annoyed at this little man, whispers something else. HITLER, even more angry, turns around, wiggles his but whilst tucking his shirt in properly and zipping up his pants. He turns back around to keep yelling.

HITLER

SO SIE WURST.

SUSANNE

SIE WURST?! ICH GLAUB, ICH SPINNE. WENN HIER EINER NE WURST IST, DANN SIND SIE DAS, SIE KLEINES BRAUNES WUERSTCHEN VON BRAUNAU-AM-INN. MIR REICHTS. ICH GEHE.

HITLER

GEHN SIE DOCH, SIE DOOFE SEEKUH! SCHNELL WEG VON MEINER CHAISEEE. SEHKUH! GURKE! HAENGEBAUCHSCHWEIN.

SUSANNE storms off. Hitler keeps yelling until he remembers the audience. He shares his frustration.

HITLER

How dare she! Sit in my chaise! With her FAT ass! Her fat sea-cow ass from NORTHERN GERMANY. PAH!

SUSANNE (from off-stage)

I'M FROM SOUTHERN GERMANY YOU DIM-WIT. AND YOUR CHAISE CAN KISS MY SCHWABIAN ASS.

HITLER

!!! MY CHAISE IS THE BEST. It is my ship, my safety haven from people like you!

Silence. Hitler defiantly and brat-ishly lies down on his chaise, lounges in as many ways as he can. He makes enjoyment noises for a bit too long, then remembers the audience, sits up.

Well then. Enough is enough. The best part of the evening has come. You should consider yourself lucky to have this opportunity!

I bring to you tonight my good friend Benito. The great knowledgeable people of today know him as the great Benito Mussolini, friend and ally in my conquests in life. Benny comes here tonight to present to you, with me of course, an example of humanity in its greatest perfection. Together, we present to you what life is really about. Life is about love. And love is a monument. I love monuments. Benny loves monuments. We love monuments. Everybody, please clap your hands together for the great Benito Mussolini!

Hitler prepares himself. He sits up on his chaise, trying to find the right position to seem majestic and king-like. This takes a while.

Enter Mussolini. He is morbidly obese and wears a giant fur hat. Waiters follow, carrying a giant salami. Hitler is perplexed and slightly vexed.

MUSSOLINI

Addy! I have not seen you so long!!! Welcome!

HITLER

Welcome? I welcome YOU. WELCOME.

MUSSOLINI

No, welcome to you!!! To America! Isn't this great, this country! It's so...big. So much space to put things!

HITLER

Welcome to YOU. I welcome YOU. WELCOME. WELCOME. WELCOME. Well, come! Sit in this chair!

There is no chair. Mussolini comes to sit on the chaise. Hitler is horrified, looks for a waiter, but all the waiters are holding the giant salami. Hitler loose at the audience. He goes to an audience member.

(whispers.) Chair! Chair!!!! Give me the chair!!!

Audience member hopefully gives up the chair.

Here is a chair! Come sit!

Mussolini has made himself comfortable on the chaise. Hitler doesn't know what to do.

Come sit here! HERE. This chair.

MUSSOLINI

Thank you, this is acceptable.

Hitler doesn't know whether to throw a fit or what to do.

Oh yes, Addy, I have brought you a gift. I bring you this salami!

Hitler is astounded. His astonishment turns into vexation. He fidgets.

HITLER

Thank you, BENNY. But I already have a sausage. We have many sausages in Germany.

MUSSOLINI

Oh, Addy, I'm sure you do. Many little sausages. But this one, this is a real sausage. It is a salami!

Mussolini beckons the waiters, who have been awkwardly standing on stage, holding the giant salami. The waiters bring the salami to Hitler, who doesn't know what to do. He finally takes one of the waiters, pulls him over to stand by his side. The other waiter almost topples over under the weight of the giant salami. Hitler makes the other waiter accept the salami, who is on the floor. There is a mess of waiters and salami surrounding Hitler. Hitler tries to calm himself, count to ten in German, but can't.

HITLER

I AM VEGETARIAN. I CAN NOT. AND THIS IS MY CHAISE.

MUSSOLINI

What? What is your cheese?

HITLER

MY CHAISE. THIS IS MY CHAISE. YOU ARE ON MY CHAISE.

MUSSOLINI

I don't see any cheese.

Hitler squawks, removes himself from the mess of waiter and salami, runs over to the chaise. He gestures at the chaise as if explaining its form and function.

HITLER

MEINS, MEINS, MEINS. MY legs! MY soft, paisley decoration! MY headrest! MY CHAISE.

Silence. Hitler is out of breath.

MUSSOLINI

Addy. Have you been to see Dr. Wolf lately?

HITLER

Silence.

I have not.

MUSSOLINI

Well there we have it. You know what you to do.

HITLER

Grumpy. I don't want to.

MUSSOLINI

ADDY.

HITLER

Okayyy! Fine. MAMA.

Pause. Hitler slowly begins tapping his foot and singing a little tune. He gets into it, his mood lifts visibly. He sinks down onto the chaise next to Mussolini.

MUSSOLINI

Better?

HITLER

Hmm.

JA. JAJAJAJA. YES.

MUSSOLINI

Are we ready for the big presentation?

HITLER

YES. Ladies and gentlemen! My good friend Benito Mussolini and I, Adolf Hitler, present to you now, a real piece of "generate" art. It is the opposite of "degenerate" art. It is the epitome of high art, it is monumental and grandiose. This is real art. Enjoy!

Hitler and Mussolini sit down, attentively watching the screen. A Leni Riefenstahl-esque movie clip begins, showing Hitler and Mussolini posing on rocks and various other "monuments". Suddenly the movie breaks, and a home video clip of Hitler dancing to jazz in his underwear comes on.

Back on stage, Mussolini cannot believe it. Hitler can believe it even less.

MUSSOLINI

Addy? ADDY?! WHAT IS THIS? HOW COULD YOU- I DON'T UNDERSTAND-

HITLER

BENNY! NONONO, IT'S NOT WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE--

Mussolini starts leaving. Hitler doesn't know what to do. Tantrum time. He turns to the audience. The video of him playing is in mid-play, music blaring.

DON'T YOU JUST SIT THERE. OUT! OUT! GET OUT! OUUUUT! RAUS! WEG MIT EUCH IHR SCHEISSER! RAUSSS!!!

BENNY! WAITTT!

Mussolini exits through side door, Hitler running after him, screaming.

End (for now.)

Note: The waiters announce the talk-balk.

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