Confronting the Past through Popular Musical Theatre: The Effects of Austrian Postwar Cultural Policies on the Reception History of Musicals

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Abstract

Exploring the effects of Austrian postwar cultural policies on the reception history of popular musical theatre, I analyze the role of the Opfermythos narrative and Kulturnation concept in the critical response to Broadway musicals after World War II. Because of their fictional portrayal of National Socialism, I focus on the Austrian premieres of Cabaret (1970), The Sound of Music (1993), and The Producers (2008). How does each musical figure into the Austrian discourse on Vergangenheitsbewältigung? Do they challenge the narrative of the Opfermythos? I argue that the anti-American undercurrents in the reviews of Cabaret, numerous references to Austria’s image in the reviews of The Sound of Music, and the resurgent bias against musicals in the political conflict over funding behind the premiere of The Producers are all part of a pattern that points toward the cultural elitism and cultural protectionism inherent to the Kulturnation politics favored by the founding fathers of the Zweite Republik.
The Origins of the *Kulturnation* Policy

In order to create ideological and moral distance between the newly re-founded Republic of Austria (*Zweite Republik*) and the Third Reich, Austrian government representatives carefully crafted the country’s image as a nation of culture (*Kulturnation*) in the years immediately following World War II.\(^1\) Building on the Enlightenment notion of culture and barbarianism as mutually exclusive antipodes, the adoption of the *Kulturnation* policy signaled a return to civilization to the rest of the world because it positioned the *Zweite Republik* in diametrical opposition to the barbaric Nazi regime.\(^2\) Whereas Germany accepted its liability as a Nazi successor state, Austria disavowed any legal, moral, or political responsibilities by hiding behind the myth of being Hitler’s first victim (*Opfermythos*). Instead, the founding fathers of the *Zweite Republik* located the young nation in the long-standing cultural tradition of the Austrian Habsburg empire, which reaches all the way back to Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–91) and Franz Grillparzer (1791–1872).\(^3\) Within this continuity, the Nazi years could be reduced to a mere blip on the historical radar.\(^4\) In this sense, the narrative of the *Kulturnation* policy is consistent with the *Opfermythos*:\(^5\) When the Nazis occupied Austria, they also hijacked its cultural institutions and art treasures. Accordingly, artists were forced or duped into collaborating with the new regime, which is one reason why well-known figures like Herbert von Karajan (1908–89) or the Viennese acting family Hörbiger were quickly de-Nazified and put back to work at Vienna’s two premier houses, the Staatsoper and Burgtheater respectively.\(^6\) It was pertinent for the young nation to reclaim its cultural heritage and institutions from the Nazis and (re-)contextualize both as distinctly Austrian—and also to justify its independency as a nation: “Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Burgtheater, Staatsoper, Philharmoniker, Wiener Sängerknaben and Salzburger Festspiele” became the tenets of Austrian cultural identity politics both at home and abroad.\(^7\) Consequently, the time period between 1938 and 1945 could be treated as a temporary abnormality that many people just wanted to leave behind so they could return to “normality.” Since part of the idea behind the *Kulturnation* policy was to eclipse any responsibilities pertaining to the Nazi regime,\(^8\) Austrians dealt with war crimes and anti-Semitism for decades only very reluctantly.\(^9\) The prevailing narrative, however, that Austria was the first victim of Hitler’s aggressions could no longer hold up to public scrutiny in the face of the 1986 allegations against presidential candidate Kurt Waldheim (1918–2007).\(^10\) Although the former Secretary-General of the United Nations denied any involvement in war crimes, people increasingly had a hard time believing Waldheim’s protestations that he did not have any knowledge of war crimes, as he got caught up in a series of half-truths and contradictions. Frustrated by the lack of critical engagement with the past, a group of playwrights associated with the Burgtheater began to challenge the *Opfermythos* in the 1980s, resulting in a series of scandals. While Elfriede Jelinek’s *Burgtheater* (1985), George Tabori’s *Mein Kampf* (1987), and especially Thomas Bernhard’s *Heldenplatz* (1988) have received considerable attention from scholars and journalists alike,\(^11\) little research has been carried out about musicals in Austria that deal with the portrayal of Nazi themes,\(^12\) even though the German-language premiere of *Cabaret* at the Theater an der Wien preceded Jelinek’s *Burgtheater* and the Waldheim affair by fifteen years. Within this context, the Austrian reception history of the stage musicals *The Sound of Music* (1959), *Cabaret* (1966), and *The Producers* (2001) deserves further special consideration, because each show deals with different aspects of National Socialism in the plot.\(^13\) *The Sound of Music* by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II recounts the story of the Trapp family from
Salzburg, which was forced into exile by the Nazis after the Anschluss. *Cabaret* by John Kander and Fred Ebb chronicles the experiences of a young US novelist in Berlin as he witnesses the rise of Nazism. The titular protagonists of Mel Brooks and Thomas Meehan’s *The Producers* resort to staging a Nazi play in postwar New York City in order to affront Broadway audiences, but their ingenious plan to recoup their investments with a sure-fire flop backfires when theatregoers mistake the Nazi revue for satire. Despite their different approaches to (staging) Nazism, each musical pushes Austrian audiences to reflect on and come to terms with the past (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*).

Published interviews and archived personal correspondence by the theatre impresarios Rolf Kutschera (Theater an der Wien), Hans Gratzer (Schauspielhaus Wien), and Kathrin Zechner (Vereinigte Bühnen Wien) provide insight into the motivations behind bringing each Broadway musical to Vienna for the first time: the German-language premiere of *Cabaret* at the Theater an der Wien on November 14, 1970, the Austrian premiere of *The Sound of Music* at the Schauspielhaus Wien on February 27, 1993, and the German-language premiere of *The Producers* at the Ronacher on June 30, 2008. In order to analyze the critical response to each musical more accurately, I will contextualize the productions within their respective sociopolitical circumstances and the contemporary discourse on *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. How do *Cabaret*, *The Sound of Music*, and *The Producers* fit into or challenge the *Kulturnation* policy’s agenda?

## The *Kulturnation* Policy’s Effects on Popular Musical Theatre

As a compound noun, the term *Kulturnation* consists of the German words for culture and nation in their singular form. Thus, the concept is based on the presupposition that a nation is united by one common culture.[14] Disregarding the lived plurality of (sub-)cultures, *Kulturnation* pursues the idea of a special, albeit imagined, homogeneous culture.[15] Under the conservative leadership of the *Österreichische Volkspartei* (ÖVP) in the 1950s and 1960s, this culture became synonymous with serious or highbrow art.[16] This meant an unabashed preference for historic art treasures and decidedly Austrian cultural heritage.[17] With little room left for contemporary art forms, such as the Broadway musical, which was imported from the United States in the 1950s, the ÖVP’s conservative, nostalgic cultural policies account—among other things—for the slow acceptance of this genre as an artistic force to be reckoned with among Viennese critics.[18] The review of Leonard Bernstein’s *A Wonderful Town* in the government-owned *Wiener Zeitung* illustrates how the *Kulturnation* policy pitted highbrow arts and lowbrow entertainment against each other:

> Art institutes as well as popular theatre are necessary because people need art as well as entertainment. It is important, though, that the two happen at the right place, the right time, and to the appropriate extent. Up to now, the Volksoper belonged to the former category. The new musical-era, however, has brought changes and let the house plummet to “the first floor of art life.”[19]

Tied down to its origins as musical comedy, the Broadway musical would remain relegated to the domain of entertainment in Austria for decades to come, despite such groundbreaking musical plays as *West Side Story* (1957) or *Man of La Mancha* (1965), which dealt with serious subject matters. Thus, when in 1970 *Cabaret* premiered at the Theater an der Wien, critics still considered National Socialism too serious a topic to be dealt with in musical theatre.[20]
Another review of *Wonderful Town* in *Neues Österreich*, which was jointly published by the ÖVP, the *Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs* (SPÖ), and the *Kommunistische Partei Österreichs* (KPÖ) in the 1950s, betrays the nationalistic slant behind the *Kulturnation* concept:

“We confess that we oppose the genre of musical because it is entirely foreign, un-Viennese and musically inferior. But if the Volksoper wants to remain true to its name and mission, it has to carefully cultivate Spieloper, Singspiel, and classic operetta, too, which was neglected this year. Austrians are tolerant and we do not want a committee on ‘un-Austrian activities.’ But the import of American surplus goods must not push native art into the background.”

Part of *Kulturnation* policy, then, was also to guard Austrian national treasures and cultural heritage from undue outside influences. To ward off Soviet influence in postwar Austria, the United States continued its efforts to re-educate the Austrian people by running its own newspapers (*Wiener Kurier*, 1945–54), radio stations (*Rot-Weiß-Rot*, 1945–54), and libraries (*Amerika-Häuser*). Along with rock’n’roll and Hollywood movies, US troops brought Broadway musicals to Vienna. Marcel Prawy (1911–2003), who emigrated to the US during the Nazi regime, returned as a cultural officer to Vienna, where he introduced locals to the new genre via radio shows and concert-lectures. In the American occupation zone, Austrians had to go along with “the American way of life” in many respects, but when it came to arts and theatre, they stood their ground. And apparently Viennese critics chose the Broadway musical as their hill to die on. On both sides of the political spectrum, anti-American sentiments lingered on for many years after the war ended, which were often expressed in a perceived inferiority of the US cultural sector, which catered to mass tastes.

The effects of *Kulturnation* politics, I argue, are prevalent in the critical response to *Cabaret*, *The Sound of Music*, and *The Producers*: Many reviews condemned *Cabaret* simply on the basis that it originated in the United States and therefore should not deal with serious Austrian subject matters. Furthermore, the discussion of *The Sound of Music* below exemplifies how much of Austria’s image and international reputation hinged on the narrative of a victimized *Kulturnation* until the 1990s. Maintaining the image of a *Kulturnation* costs the Austrian government a pretty penny in the form of subsidies to theatres on national, regional, and local levels, among other things. Conflicts over the proper allocation of funds between political parties are inevitable, as the case study of *The Producers* will show.

**Cabaret (1970)**

It was a gamble by Rolf Kutschera (1916–2012) to present *Cabaret* at the Theater an der Wien in 1970. The musical play challenges the black-and-white picture many Austrians probably had of the Nazi regime due to the *Opfermythos* by portraying conflicted protagonists whose actions make them equally victims and enablers of the regime. “When I purchased the rights for this play I knew that the theme would be difficult for people having lived through this time and that not everybody would appreciate it,” Kutschera wrote in a letter to lyricist Fred Ebb after the premiere:

“What made me finally decide to produce “CABARET” in Vienna was the fact that my theatre is subsidized … and that I think it my duty to present beside pure entertainment like “Hello, Dolly” and “My Fair Lady”, etc., musicals dealing with problems of our time, musicals penetrating into the literary sphere, as, e.g., “CABARET.”

Concerns over *Cabaret’s* offensive potential for Austrian audiences must have weighed into
Robert Gilbert’s translation of the musical play. For instance, he toned down Fräulein Schneider’s confrontation with Cliff in the second act, turning her song “What Would You Do?” into “Wie geht’s weiter?” (“What comes next?”). As a result, the discomforting effects of the recurring dissonances on the word “you” are lost in translation, too. The nature of the song also changes in the German translation from self-resignation to self-interest, because rather than challenging Cliff—and by extension the audience—to take a stance, Fräulein Schneider is now only interested in what will become of her. Furthermore, Gilbert opted not to translate Fred Ebb’s original punch line for the song “If You Could See Her through My Eyes,” which was “she wouldn’t look Jewish at all,” and went with the safer version “she isn’t a meeskite at all,” which became “dann säht ihr mein Miesnick ist schön” in German.\[26\]

The song is a flaming indictment of human prejudices by the Emcee (or Conférencier as the character is called in the Viennese production), who provokes audiences with his relationship with a dancing gorilla. During *Cabaret*’s New England tryouts, Jewish communities had accused director-producer Hal Prince of comparing Jewish women to gorillas, so he had the line changed for the Broadway premiere.\[27\] However, Joel Grey, who originated the role of the Emcee, slipped the original punch line in whenever he felt that he could get away with it.\[28\] Although it was restored for—and even included in the cast recording of—*Cabaret*’s West End transfer, the offensive joke was dropped in London after a few weeks, too.\[29\] Probably anticipating a veritable scandal in Vienna if the gorilla were to turn out to be Jewish in the song “Säht ihr sie mit meinen Augen,” the decision was made to go with the Jewish word for “ugly person” in the German translation.

As expected, the reviews reflect the mixed audience reactions: Whereas Rudolf U. Klaus commented in the tabloid *Kurier* on the “stone-cold silence” which followed the Nazi hymn “Der morgige Tag ist mein” (orig. “Tomorrow Belongs to Me”) in the musical, the party newspaper of the ÖVP in Upper Austria, the *Linzer Volksblatt*, raved about the “rapturous applause at the first two performances.”\[31\] Gotthard Böhm from the conservative newspaper *Die Presse*, meanwhile, attributed the clapping to a well-placed claque.\[32\] In his letter to Ebb, Kutschera elaborated further:

> People over fifty who have seen that time, also in Austria, refuse the theme. Young people, up to thirty and thirtyfive [sic], accept the show, the sophistication, the wit and the esprit it offers and are not offended by the theme, for what they know of that time is only what their parents told them, and that is to a great extent very subjective. On the contrary, the young people’s reaction to the theme is very positive.\[33\]

In light of the latent anti-Semitism during the parliamentary elections earlier that year, maybe some had even begun to question the official *Opfermythos*.

Incumbent chancellor Josef Klaus (ÖVP) had campaigned with the slogan “Chancellor Dr. Klaus—a real Austrian,”\[34\] an innuendo about his opponent Bruno Kreisky’s (1911–90) Jewish heritage.\[35\] The leader of the SPÖ had fled after the Anschluss and spent his exile in Sweden, whereas Klaus (1910–2001) had stayed and was drafted into Hitler’s army. Following the elections on March 1, 1970, the *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs* (FPÖ) suddenly found itself in the role of kingmaker. After negotiations for a coalition between SPÖ and ÖVP fell through, Kreisky opted for a minority government with the support of the FPÖ. A successor to the *Verband der Unabhängigen* (VdU), the FPÖ had become a home for incorrigible Nazis who could not or did not want to subscribe to either the ÖVP’s conservative Catholicism or the SPÖ’s social-democratic ideology.\[36\] Moreover, Kreisky’s cabinet included five former NSDAP members, over whom the chancellor held his
It is important to view Cabaret’s premiere at the Theater an der Wien on November 14, 1970, in the context of these political developments. To that effect, the Jewish artist Gerhard Bronner (1922–2007), who had fled the Nazi regime as a young adult, wrote in his program notes that people should not view Cabaret as “yet another Nazi play” but as a topical metaphor:

The danger which the actors in “CABARET” ignore consciously or unconsciously is almost analogous to the danger we live in today; and just as analogous is the reaction of the majority of people who live in prosperity. ... If you then see “CABARET” tonight, do not look at it as a tendentious work, nor should you look at it as the dichotomy between the good and the bad guys. Try to project that which you see onto our times! No longer feel lulled into the false sense of security that the menace that is performed for you today has been overcome. The threat is stronger than ever. May “CABARET” help us all react to this threat somewhat more correctly.

Among critics at least, Bronner’s appeal fell on deaf ears, since none of them addressed Cabaret’s potential as a present-day parable in their reviews. Only Gerhard Brunner complained in the tabloid Kronen Zeitung that Bronner’s words made the whole evening worse. Although Vienna staged a near replica of the original Broadway production, none of the critics commented on the role of the audience doubling as patrons at the Kit Kat Klub.

By contrast, many of their US colleagues—such as Walter Kerr from the New York Times, the Washington Post’s Richard L. Coe, Haskel Frankel from the National Observer, the Boston Herald’s Samuel Hirsch, and Harold V. Cohen from the Pittsburgh Post Gazette—pointed to the trapezoid mirror in Boris Aronson’s set design. Mounted to the fly tower, it reflected audience reactions back into the auditorium and confronted them with their entertainment through such songs as “Der morgige Tag ist mein” or “Säht ihr sie mit meinen Augen,” although the former song at least did catch the attention of some critics. Fritz Walden referred to it as “Witchcraft 101” (“Hexeneinmaleins”), sung by a brown Lorelei, in the SPÖ’s official party newspaper Arbeiter-Zeitung, and Ruediger Engerth compared it to the “marching songs of the brown battalions” in the conservative regional newspaper Salzburger Nachrichten. Böhm considered it somewhat problematic that Kander could conceive of such a beautiful melody for a Nazi song, of all things, and was sickened by the waiters and whores singing it together at the Kit Kat Klub, completely bypassing its dramaturgical function at the engagement party of Fräulein Schneider and Herr Schultz. Only Klaus documented the audience’s reaction going into intermission after that song has been revealed to be a Nazi hymn at the engagement party: stone-cold silence.

Equally telling is the critics’ reluctance to discuss the portrayal of anti-Semitism in Cabaret. Böhm merely mentioned the “Jewish fruit shop owner, whom the Aryan Fräulein Schneider does not want to take” in his plot summary, as if that explained the problematic portrayal of Nazism in the musical play. Similarly, Walden included “the melancholic love episode between the older boarding lady Fräulein Schneider and the non-Aryan fruit shop owner Schultz” in his plot synopsis. Neither of them discussed how Cabaret portrays anti-Semitism beyond this superficial juxtaposition of the couple’s ethnicities. Lothar Nesch went one step further in the conservative, regional paper Oberösterreichische Nachrichten and cited a concrete example of how anti-Semitic sentiments affect the couple’s relationship: During their engagement party “a storm trooper informs the bride that it would not be expedient to marry a Jew.” But that is also the full extent of his discussion of anti-Semitism in the play. On the contrary, the Linzer Volksblatt linked the elderly couple’s breakup to “clinking window panes announcing the persecution of Jews,” referencing another scene in which someone throws a brick through Herr Schultz’s
window. Most notably, Engerth drew a direct line from bricks in windows to the gas chambers of Auschwitz and the smell of burnt human flesh. In contrast to his colleagues, Brunner did not even broach the subject. Not one newspaper printed the word anti-Semitism in its review, probably because most Austrian critics conflated the discussion of anti-Semitism in the musical play with that of Nazism.

Far from disappearing from Austrian society after the war, anti-Semitism had simply been relegated from the public sphere to the private one as a result of the Opfermythos and Kulturnation politics, which had favored efforts to hush up the Nazi years altogether. Historian Gerhard Botz (*1941) refers to a “paranazistic popular tradition” that was allowed to develop in the semi-public sphere of pubs, alongside the official historical viewpoints promoted by the political parties. Since Nazism and anti-Semitism had never been properly dealt with by Austrians, they continued to lurk in the shadows for decades, surfacing only occasionally, for example in the campaign against Kreisky.

This also explains the covert Nazism and latent anti-Semitism that can even be detected in the reviews of Cabaret, although most critics went to great lengths to distance themselves from the Nazi regime. Brunner, for instance, referred to Cabaret as “one of the most bizarre spawns of the entire genre” in the polemical Kronen Zeitung. In view of the fact that the original creative team behind Cabaret consisted predominantly of Jews, his rhetoric walks a fine line between anti-Semitism and professional review, coming dangerously close to the Nazis’ preferred terminology of “degenerate art” (entartete Kunst). And Böhm even reverted to victim blaming and shaming for the conservative Die Presse:

The certainly sincere anti-Nazi tendency of the play can turn into the opposite. Berlin was like that in the 1930s? Then it is no surprise that Hitler came. The cheap honkytonk establishment is no loss. A few whores, a few pimps less. So what?

For all his complaints about the superficial treatment of Nazism in his review of Cabaret, Böhm himself trivializes it. Essentially, he is saying that people with vulgar lifestyles and loose morals forfeit their freedom and right to live. His words are reminiscent of the Nazis’ justification that they had to clean up the human race. The residual elements of Nazism in Brunner’s and Böhm’s rhetoric are arguably rather a sign of the authors’ lack of critical reflection on their word choice than of their actual beliefs. Still, they are symptomatic of the poor Vergangenheitsbewältigung at the time. Convinced by their collective victimhood, many Austrians did not even entertain the possibility of remnants of Nazi ideology clouding their judgments, failing to recognize anti-Semitism routinely.

Most critics agreed that National Socialism was too serious a topic for musical entertainment. According to Böhm, Cabaret’s superficial treatment of Nazism was built into the musical play, since neither of its literary templates—John van Druten’s straight play I Am a Camera (1951) and Christopher Isherwood’s book The Berlin Stories (1945)—could do it justice either. Similarly, Brunner complained that the creators’ artistic ineptitude reduced Nazism to “a kind of stimulating backdrop,” which led Nesch to the conclusion that “catastrophes and musicals do not go together.” Accordingly, all three of them saw Cabaret as evidence of the rift between arts and entertainment, which was intensified by Kulturnation politics in Austria:
The German tragedy, this Götterdämmerung of a people, is not suited for cheap entertainment. For those who were in doubt, there is now proof. How superficial everything becomes, how questionable. No, this is no way of dealing with this gory subject matter. The musical’s dramaturgy is bound to founder.

Apparently not even the Viennese premieres of West Side Story at the Volksoper Wien (1968) or Man of La Mancha at the Theater an der Wien (1968) had been able to overcome the bias that serious subjects should be reserved for the high arts. A few critics, like Engerth, stayed out of this debate in their reviews. And although Walden did not think that Broadway musicals should be automatically precluded from tackling the gravest chapter of Austrian history, he qualified that its nature as a song and dance routine made it harder to do: “While it is possible to represent the fear and misery of the Third Reich on stages, even if they symbolize revue-like hell, it is more difficult to sing and dance them.” Considering his employer, the SPÖ, Walden’s position should be contextualized within the shifting political powers between the ÖVP and SPÖ at the time. Beginning under Kreisky in 1970, the SPÖ democratized access to the arts and widened the ÖVP’s narrow definition of culture to include mass culture and contemporary arts.

In a variation of the debate on the depictability of the Shoah, Böhm argued in his review that not even documentaries can really capture the horror of the Nazi takeover, which is partially why Cabaret was doomed to fail from the start. Many Holocaust-survivors, like Elie Wiesel (1918–2016), also categorically ruled out fiction of any kind about the Shoah, because it inevitably trivializes the Holocaust. To be sure, Cabaret takes place during the rise of Nazism, effectively ending shortly before the Nazi takeover. Yet, informed audiences knew exactly what kind of fate lay in store for the musical’s protagonists. Whereas Sally Bowles could end up the toast of many an SS party, as Engerth suggests in his review, Herr Schultz and the Emcee would likely end up in a concentration camp. So like Engerth, who drew parallels to Auschwitz in his review, Böhm put the events depicted on stage into their historical context, without spelling it out.

Although some would rightly argue that Nazism should never be discussed without considering the Holocaust, equating life under Nazi rule with the Shoah might be equally offensive to others. One reason why the Opfermythos worked so flawlessly for such a long time in Austria was because the vast majority could identify with it; even Nazis and their collaborators who fancied themselves victims of the denazification efforts, which often left them unemployed or interned:

We were all victims of fascism. Victim was the soldier, who experienced the war at the front in its most terrible form. Victim was the population who was waiting in the hinterland full of horror for the call of the cuckoo in order to flee to their shelters and who, with longing, wished for the day which would take this fright from them. Victims were those who had to leave their native country to carry the mostly sad lot of the emigrant. Finally, we were victims, who in prisons, penitentiaries and concentration camps were defenseless prey of the SS.

The general threat of deportation looming over the heads of everyone living under Nazi rule was also frequently invoked in the narrative of the Geist der Lagerstraße (spirit of the camp street), which had the founding fathers of the Zweite Republik bonding over their collective suffering as political prisoners in the concentration camps at the hands of the Nazis, thus overcoming their political differences. Equating the suffering of the Jews with the experiences of resistance fighters, widows, and orphans on the home front and repatriated prisoners of war reached new levels of perversion in 1947 with the Opferfürsorgegesetz—a law intended to provide welfare to victims of political persecution and avoid payment of damages to victims of religious, nationalist,
and racist persecution.\(^69\)

A convenient side effect of the argument that Nazism is too serious for musical entertainment was that it could also be used as a pretext to avoid or abort a serious and critical engagement with the past that might otherwise emerge. Since the Kultur Nation policy encouraged the belittlement of the genre, it indirectly preempted a potential debate on Vergangenheitsbewältigung, or at least contributed to it, in this case. The cursory treatment of the topic by the critics seems to confirm this. Rather than discussing how Cabaret fails in its portrayal of Nazism, critics often reverted to another strategy of Kultur Nation politics: cultural protectionism.

In doing so, they fixated on the fact that the events in Cabaret are told from a US perspective. Walden complained about the distortion of historical perspectives caused by geographical distance,\(^70\) and Brunner mused that the plot might as well be set in Berlin, New Hampshire.\(^71\) By comparison, a great deal of Broadway reviews celebrated the authenticity of Cabaret’s Berlin, for which Lotte Lenya (1898–1981), Kurt Weill’s widow and Fräulein Schneider in the original Broadway cast, vouched as a German living in exile.\(^72\) Even Böhm referred to the tremendous success the musical had there, but then he wondered if “maybe people have different eyes and stronger nerves on Broadway than in a country that lived through the aftermath. That aftermath, which was so abominable. No, this is nothing worth applauding.”\(^73\) There seems to have been a common consensus amongst reviewers that the prerogative of, or definitive authority over, narrating the Nazi period should lie with “people who were there” rather than foreigners.

Considering the meticulously maintained official narrative of the Opfermythos and the nationalistic protectionism behind the Kultur Nation policy, it hardly comes as a surprise that Austrians struggled with such a delicate chapter of their history being handled by a group of US-Americans, even in a fictionalized version. Fifteen years after the allied occupation of Austria, anti-American undertones could still be detected in the reviews. Walden compared the genre to “frozen goods,”\(^74\) and Brunner described Cabaret as one of “those run-of-the-mill products by cunning manufacturers, whose sole purpose it is to keep the cogwheels of show business turning.”\(^75\) Granted, similar prejudices can be found in German media as well, which viewed Broadway musicals as commercialized entertainment rather than art,\(^76\) but the Kultur Nation policy exacerbated the situation in Austria. It reinforced the impression that Americans, who lack culture, produce cheap entertainment, while Austrians create art.\(^77\) Cabaret could have become an opportunity for younger generations, who did not know how to ask the older generations questions about the Third Reich, to open up a dialogue.\(^78\) But the pressure in Austrian society to eschew any discussion about Nazism was still too big. Perhaps the message in Cabaret that complacency allows fascist regimes to grow hit a little too close to home for Austrian critics, who were still content with the Opfermythos and therefore preferred to sweep any real critical engagement with the past under the carpet.

**The Sound of Music (1993)**

In September 1992, the manager of the Schauspielhaus Wien came under fire due to dwindling audience numbers. Therefore, Hans Gratzer moved up the Austrian premiere of The Sound of Music, which he had already optioned two years earlier,\(^79\) and included it in the 1992/93 season.\(^80\) Not everyone approved of his decision; some reproached Gratzer for straying off course, that is, presenting world premieres and first nights of modern, contemporary dramas.\(^81\) These critical voices were probably unaware of the fact that The Sound of Music had never been
staged in Austria before, despite its plot being set in Salzburg. It was precisely this thirty-four-year-long gap in the reception history which piqued Gratzer’s interest.

He reinterpreted the Rodgers and Hammerstein classic from the 1950s as a story about exile, drawing parallels to contemporary migration in the 1990s:

> The intention is to make a play about exile. Back then, when it was written, people saw the ending of the musical as a happy departure to America. Today, this is viewed more seriously. Is there any country left where one can go to? That is a scary question. [81]

In the wake of the Yugoslav Wars, many refugees fled across the border to Austria in the 1990s, which fueled the xenophobic rhetoric of the FPÖ. In the last week of January 1993, party leader Jörg Haider initiated a petition for a referendum on immigration laws. With fewer than 500,000 signatures, the initiative “Austria First” (Österreich zuerst), which demanded legislation to stop immigration and promoted government-sanctioned ostracism of foreigners, fell short of Haider’s expectations. [82] In return, over 200,000 people took a stand against rising xenophobia by forming a sea of lights (Lichtermeer) at the Heldenplatz in Vienna—the very same square Hitler had used to proclaim the Anschluss fifty-five years prior—on January 23, 1993, just a month before The Sound of Music opened at the Schauspielhaus Wien. [84]

In light of these developments, Gratzer’s interpretation revolved around the question of how joining different groups might change a person:

> The topic “participation” is especially important to us. It is a story about participation. Another pointer is the various systems of order: family, military, abbey, Nazi regime. It’s about the question: How do you not join? The character of Maria is some kind of anarchist in this arrangement. She has difficulties with subordination at the abbey; she breaks with the Baron’s military drill and flees with her family from the Nazis. We don’t want to show a sweet person but a brave one. [80]

Accordingly, his portrayal of Nazism focused on what partaking in that kind of collective behavior does to people: In this version of The Sound of Music, the Nazis do not goose-step across the stage; they regress into primates as they lose their humanity and ability to think freely. This approach is a consequent continuation of the cartoonish depiction of Nazism chosen by the authors of the musical. Richard Rodgers, Oscar Hammerstein II, Howard Lindsay, and Russel Crouse restricted the Nazi characters to speaking roles only. This is most obvious in the transition of Rolf Gruber: He starts out as an impressionable young telegram boy who shares a love duet with the Captain’s oldest daughter, but he loses his singing privileges as he joins the SS, and his text is reduced to spoken lines only, just like the rest of the Nazis in the musical. Gratzer went even one step further and robbed them of the ability to speak altogether by putting primordial sounds into their mouths.

Whereas twenty years earlier most critics had shunned any direct discussion of Nazism in Cabaret, this time reviewers critiqued the depiction of Nazis in The Sound of Music openly. While Heinz G. Pribil (Wiener Zeitung), [86] Roland Koberg (Oberösterreichische Nachrichten), [87] Kurt Kahl (Kurier), [88] and Michaela Knapp (Die Presse) [89] commended Gratzer’s Nazi portrayal, some old arguments shone through between the lines in the reviews of Renate Wagner and Helmut Schneider. Wagner mused in the Neues Volksblatt, the official newspaper of the ÖVP:
Gratzer handles the Nazis with less care, distorting and stylizing them (the swastika becoming a kind of giant spider) and making them act like great apes—it figures that he did not want to let the over-earnest gravity of history bleed into his fun interpretation of the play, which sometimes crosses the line. [90]

And Schneider concluded in the *Salzburger Nachrichten* that Gratzer’s depiction trivialized Nazism:

By contrast, the Nazis were made by the director to look too harmless, like prosimians in the guise of humans. The traitors squat on the park bench, beating their chests and babbling unintelligible primordial sounds. The swastika became a lightning bolt. The meaning of this historical inaccuracy is unclear. [91]

The inspiration for the stylized swastika, which must have looked, according to Wagner’s and Schneider’s descriptions, like a giant spider with lightning bolts as its legs, comes straight out of the libretto: Marta, one of the Trapp children, describes the flag of the Third Reich innocently as “the flag with the black spider on it.” [92] Maybe Gratzer flinched from putting a swastika on stage, even if the laws regulating the use of Nazi symbols (*Abzeichengesetz*) would have allowed it. Keeping in mind Gratzer’s words about exile today, however, the adaptation of the sign is more likely supposed to reflect the changing of the guard. The NSDAP may be forbidden by law, but the FPÖ took up the mantle from the Nazis and uses any legal loophole they can find to propagate the same racist ideas and agitating rhetoric.

Astonishingly none of the critics picked up on the parallels Gratzer drew between Hitler’s anti-Semitic rhetoric and Haider’s xenophobic baiting. Even though the critics in *Der Standard*, *Kronen Zeitung*, *Oberösterreichische Nachrichten*, and *Salzburger Nachrichten* pointed to the exile of the Trapp family, they did not connect their fate to that of hundreds of contemporary refugees living in exile in Austria, against whom the FPÖ instigated. Only Kurt Kahl noted in the *Kurier* that “the success of the family choir in America remains a mere assertion: the plot breaks off with the passage.” [93] He sensed that Americans did not exactly roll out the red carpet for refugees in the 1930s either, and the Trapp family struggled during their first years in exile. It seemed safer to discuss historic exile in reviews rather than contemporary migration.

Austrian media were much more interested in the positive effects the Trapp family and *The Sound of Music* had on the image of Austria abroad. [94] In foreign policy, the *Kulturnation* agenda manifested itself in a picture-postcard idyll of Austria, which promoted Austrian cultural brands like the Wiener Philharmoniker or the Wiener Sängerknaben amidst historic heritage sites and beautiful landscapes. [95] In his review, Koberg quotes Johanna von Trapp, whose contribution to the Schauspielhaus’s program notes shows how well the *Kulturnation* policy worked even for Austrian emigrants: “only *The Sound of Music* dramatized for the average American ‘that we are not Germans but a peaceful and talented small nation in one of Europe’s most beautiful places.’” [96] This serene picture of Austria had suffered enormously in the wake of the Waldheim affair and was still only slowly recovering in the 1990s. [97]

However, as Koberg, Knapp, and Wagner observed, the best advertisement for the country had not come from Austria itself anyway but rather by way of the famous Hollywood film adaptation of the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical. [98] Knapp commented in *Die Presse* on the paradox that the Trapp family story is even more popular than Arnold Schwarzenegger in the United States, whereas in Austria *The Sound of Music* had remained virtually unknown. [99] Reading the reviews of *The Sound of Music* at the Schauspielhaus Wien in 1993, one could almost get the impression that the Rodgers and Hammerstein classic saved Austria’s reputation from the ruins in the
aftermath of the Waldheim affair:

The story of Lieutenant Commander Georg von Trapp, who ..., as a committed Austrian, fled from Hitler with his seven children to the United States, where he won the hearts of Americans with his family choir, has probably done more for improving the image of our country overseas than Sängerknaben and Lipizzaner combined.[100]

The Kronen Zeitung’s critic praised the Trapp family for their integrity: “They did not let Hitler’s propaganda machinery co-opt them but emigrated to the USA.”[101] This observation could be construed as a veiled remark about Waldheim’s infamous statement that he had “only done his duty” (Pflichterfüllung).[102] Trapp could have stayed and answered Hitler’s call of duty to command a submarine, yet he chose to defy the Nazis. Waldheim’s selective memory, in contrast, made it look as if he had let the Nazis use him. Where Waldheim displays moral ambiguity, Trapp shows strength of character, which makes them the perfect foil for each other in this context. In another example of taking the former Austrian president to task, without ever once referring to Waldheim directly, Koberg extolled pointedly that “the savior of Austria’s image in America is Baron von Trapp.”[103] The disgraced former Austrian president was an easier target for critics than the rising political star Jörg Haider, although he and his FPÖ would further tarnish Austria’s reputation as a racist country in the coming years, culminating in the sanctions by the European Union when the ÖVP under Wolfgang Schüssel’s leadership formed a coalition with Haider’s FPÖ in 2000.

**The Producers (2008)**

Mel Brooks’s musical about two Broadway producers who try to create a flop with the tasteless Nazi revue Springtime for Hitler but instead land a success when audiences consider it a successful parody was chosen on purpose by Kathrin Zechner (*1963) to reopen the Etablissement Ronacher after its expensive remodeling into a modern musical theatre. Zechner, who headed the musicals branch of the Vereinigten Bühnen Wien (VBW) from 2004 until 2011, wanted to take a stand in the commemorative year (Gedenkjahr) 2008, which marked the 70th anniversary of the Anschluss:

More than 60 years later, a satirical treatment must be possible, too. At the beginning of the coping process stands despair, followed by speechlessness and finally debate. Another step further can be satire as an art form. ... I see myself as part of a scene in theatre, film, music, and visual arts which do their bit: Tabori’s Mein Kampf is just as necessary as Helge Schneider’s film. My part is to approach it from the perspective of musicals.[104]

The question whether musicals are equipped to deal with serious subject matters in Cabaret, which evolved into a discussion of how musicals can depict serious subjects with The Sound of Music, becomes a matter of whether or not one can/should/may make fun of Hitler.

The polarizing nature of the debate had not changed and some of the arguments were still the same, too. In the regional newspaper Kleine Zeitung, which is run by the conservative Catholic publisher Styria in Carinthia and Styria, philosopher Peter Strasser (*1950) took stock of the “Hitler boom” (Hitlers Frauen, Hitlers Kinder, Speer und Er, Der Untergang, Mein Führer, etc.) in the media:

I could not say what is more obnoxious: serious Hitler or fun Hitler. ... Any kind of laughing about Hitler engenders inappropriate proximity to the perpetrator. ... All I know is that one should not depict him as a figure onto which feelings of greatness or tragedy can be projected.[105]
Strasser’s argument brings up the old concerns about fiction trivializing Nazism and the Holocaust, dressed up in the question whether Hitler the monster can and/or should be humanized for any reason. In an interview with the Kurier, however, Mel Brooks (*1926) countered that “Hitler was an actor anyway. He fooled an entire people into being its leader. A role that was actually out of his league, which he covered up. He was in the same business as we are: he created illusions.”[106] Thus, as Ernst Trost observed in the Kronen Zeitung, Brooks “succeeds in exposing the grotesque and kitsch in Hitler’s staging of power, or any other totalitarian regime or system, using extreme hyperbole.”[107] And Derek Weber argued in his review for the Salzburger Nachrichten that Brooks and Zechner reduced the debate over parodying Hitler to a rhetorical question, which they utilized as a marketing tool.[108] Considering that The Producers had to close early in Vienna due to low ticket sales, this marketing strategy apparently backfired.

In light of Austria’s past involvement with the Third Reich and its subsequent reluctant efforts at Vergangenheitsbewältigung, several critics paid particular attention to audience reactions on first night. Peter Schneeberger from the weekly news magazine profil, which played an active role in uncovering Waldheim’s past, observed that “the patrons’ laughter very nearly died on their lips when the SS proudly formed themselves into a swastika.”[109] Similarly, Werner Rosenberger pointed towards “a few people leaving during intermission with an angry ‘hogwash’ on their lips” in his review for the Kurier.[110] Like Weber, Christian Höller from the Jüdische Allgemeine exposed the superficiality of the debate in Austrian media:

> The staging of The Producers in a city where Jews had to clean the sidewalks on their hands and knees while citizens cheered in 1938 should warrant a debate about Nazism in Austria. In other countries, even less affected ones like Argentina, South Korea, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Finland, and Australia, the play caused quite the stir and incited fierce discussions on whether and when one may laugh about Hitler. In Vienna, however, one is keen to nip any critical engagement with the content in the bud.[111]

Indeed, Austrian media were much more interested in the costly renovation of the Ronacher, to an extent that it is sometimes hard to distinguish reviews from op-ed pieces and news coverage.

During a major theatre reform in 2004, the City of Vienna restructured the VBW, through which it has run its three music theatres since 1987.[112] The Raimund Theater would continue to play musicals, while opera would move into the Theater an der Wien, beginning with the Mozart year 2006. Meanwhile, the Ronacher Theater would undergo major renovations, after which it would produce modern urban musical entertainment. The crux of the matter was that the city government actually lacked the funding for the €34.1 million modernization project, which is why it took out a loan to finance the restoration, whereupon the costs soared to a total of €46.8 million.[113] Against the will of the opposition, the SPÖ pushed the plans through city council due to its absolute majority.[114]

Brought on by the subprime mortgages in the United States in 2007, the global financial crisis hit during the renovation[115] and was still in full swing when the Ronacher reopened on June 30, 2008, with The Producers.[116] Thus, the discussion about the waste of public funds on arts and entertainment had never come to a stop and found its way into half of the reviews. Barbara Petsch, who had opposed the project from the start due to unemployment numbers and uncertainties about pension funds,[117] wrote in Die Presse:
Fortunately for politicians, they do not have to finance their passions for patina out of their own pocket, unlike private persons. The first Ronacher renovation cost roughly 140 million schillings; the current one burned through 46.8 million euros. With the result that the beautiful Ronacher, all dressed-up and sterile, resembles the ugly Raimund Theater more and more. In return, the stage can handle all the tricks of the trade now.[118]

Her colleague from the westernmost regional newspaper, Vorarlberger Nachrichten, pondered more neutrally: “Whether Vienna absolutely needs two stages for musicals remains to be seen.”[119] The critic of Der Standard, Ljubiša Tošić, would have preferred if the popular musical theatre had been reined in, so he railed against the cultural policy ambitions of the SPÖ:

It enacted the renovation of the old establishment, which is how the Musical-Theater an der Wien rose like a phoenix from the ashes of subsidies at the Ronacher. While it may not have a roof that can be opened, a lot of “money was spent nonetheless,” as deputy mayor Renate Brauner noted a little bit defiantly at the prelude to the Producers premiere, which members of the Green Party and FPÖ skipped. Out of protest over the 46.8 million Euro renovation.[120]

In 2006, the opposition had zeroed in on the VBW’s leadership for mismanagement of funds,[121] redirecting its conflict with the SPÖ to Franz Häußler, Kathrin Zechner, and Roland Geyer, who were in charge of finances, musicals, and opera, respectively.[122] In the process, old familiar arguments resurfaced, on which Wolfgang Kralicek commented in the liberal weekly newspaper Falter: “The critics of the VBW always imply condescension to an art form they deem to be substandard, and which is for badly dressed bus tourists, who have been a thorn in the side of the bourgeois bohemians at the Naschmarkt for a long time.”[123] Marie Ringler, the Green Party’s spokesperson for cultural affairs in Vienna, saw no future for the genre in the city[124] because “the musical has run its course; too many recent productions in Vienna have been flops.”[125] Similarly, the spokesman for cultural affairs of the ÖVP Wien, Andreas Salcher, claimed that “money is being invested in a globally stagnating or declining sector.”[126] The reviews by Petsch and Tošić clearly reflect that line of argument. The FPÖ, which would have preferred to team up with a private investor for the renovation in the first place,[127] called for an official investigation into the VBW’s finances by the city’s comptroller a few months before the reopening.[128] The comptroller’s office published the results of their audit just in time for the grand reopening, revealing irregularities, so the opposition felt vindicated.[129] As a result, the Viennese FPÖ and Green Party spurned the premiere of The Producers. Tošić implied in his review that the boycott may have actually been quite a handy excuse to not watch the show for the FPÖ Wien:

And finally, the play within the play, Springtime for Hitler, where revue girls wear beer steins, sausages and Valkyrie helmets as crowns and Hitler comes across as a ridiculous dreamer, a touchy-feely laughingstock. A shrinkage treatment for anything heroic, beautifully dismal. One would have loved to see the representatives of the Viennese FPÖ laughing—or maybe not laughing—in the audience.[130]

Christoph Irrgeher observed in the Wiener Zeitung that “because this opening is a big event after all (just like the amount in question is the red in the face of the opposition), theater is happening here even before the curtain rises.”[131] In a rare instance of complete agreement, the FPÖ and Green Party had staged a boycott, transferring the conflict from city hall to the theatre. As a result, anyone present at the event, from President Heinz Fischer to Councilman of Cultural Affairs Andreas Mailath-Pokorny, showed their support for musicals quasi automatically by their sheer presence, whereas those staying at home sent a strong message that public funding for the arts needed to be overhauled. Therefore, almost all critics recapped the political debate over
the Ronacher renovation, if they did not open their reviews with it.

The negative news coverage of the Ronacher and VBW in the months preceding the premiere may have had an adverse effect on ticket sales for a musical with a tough subject to sell. The open campaigning against the genre eclipsed the mostly positive reviews of the show: With the exception of Barbara Petsch, who compared *The Producers* to a museum in *Die Presse*, the mixed reviews in the *Wiener Zeitung*, *Kurier*, and *Salzburger Nachrichten* were mostly about the slow beginning and ending, while lauding the cast, translation, and choreography, among other things. Petsch’s negative attitude toward the genre and renovation may have clouded her judgment, preventing her from understanding that *The Producers* is actually a persiflage of all those retro numbers, which she calls museum-like, reminiscent of early Broadway musicals. Meanwhile, *Kronen Zeitung*, *Oberösterreichische Nachrichten*, *Format*, *profil*, *Neue Vorarlberger Tageszeitung*, and *Tiroler Tageszeitung* all published glowing reviews.

**Conclusion**

Each case study demonstrates the far-reaching effects of the *Kulturnation* policy on the reception history of musicals in Austria, especially those that deal with the Third Reich. In their reviews of *Cabaret*, many critics followed the *Kulturnation* policy’s default parameters: cultural protectionism and cultural elitism. As a result, *Cabaret*’s role in the emerging artistic discourse on *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* has gone largely unexplored. Any claims to a national prerogative of historical interpretation and depiction of Nazism seem to have vanished by the time *The Sound of Music* premiered in 1993. On the contrary, Austrian media welcomed the Americanized retelling of the Trapp family history, since it put a positive spin on the nation’s image, even in the wake of the Waldheim affair. The positive reactions to *The Sound of Music* reflected the inchoate *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, whereas the negative responses to *Cabaret* mirrored the lack of willingness to engage critically with the past. Zechner’s approach with Mel Brooks’s *The Producers*, in turn, suggests that, now that Austrians had come to terms with their past, they could laugh about Hitler and parody him. However, once again *Kulturnation* politics detracted from the issue at hand, because the staged boycott by FPÖ and Green politicians dominated the media coverage of the German-language premiere. The drawn-out political conflict took up so much space in many reviews that hardly any room was left to discuss the moral question of spoofing Hitler. In all three case studies, the impresarios went beyond entertaining their patrons with repertoire from popular musical theatre, grasping the opportunity to intentionally challenge their audiences intellectually with topical issues, even if not everyone was always willing and ready for this kind of confrontation. The failure of critics to recognize the productions as artistic attempts to further the discourse on *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* constitutes a missed opportunity to explore their full potential as cautionary tales for the repeat of history.
References


2. Walter Benjamin, Theodor W. Adorno, and Zygmunt Bauman challenge this universal concept of culture as refinement in the discourse on civilization, arguing that culture and barbarity are two sides of the same coin named civilization. In section seven of Theses on the Philosophy of History (1940), Benjamin postulates that cultural artifacts are reminders of the barbarism with which they were acquired by the very civilizations they come to represent. Adorno views Kulturkritik as the final step in the dialectic tension between culture and barbarism in Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft (1951), which he concludes with the verdict that any artistic engagement must constitute an act of barbarity after Auschwitz. And in Modernity and the Holocaust (1989), Bauman considers barbarity a byproduct of modern civilizations rather than a regression to a previous stage of development. ↑

3. This is in contrast to the situation after the collapse of the multiethnic Habsburg empire following World War I, which left the considerably shrunk new nation state of Austria reeling for a new cultural identity independent of the abolished monarchy. Cf. Norbert Christian Wolf, Eine Triumphpforte österreichischer Kunst: Hugo von Hofmannsthals Gründung der Salzburger Festspiele (Salzburg: Jung und Jung, 2014) for a discussion of how the establishment of the Salzburger Festspiele contributed to these efforts. ↑


6. For more information on hiring practices regarding former Nazi collaborators and sympathizers in the field of music, see David Monod, Settling Scores: German Music, Denazification & the Americans, 1945–1953 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 79–95. Similar discussions on Karl Böhm, Clemens Krauss, and Wilhelm Furtwängler can be found in Kerschbaumer and Müller, Begnadet für das Schöne, 30–42 and 50–66. ↑


13. Since many other musicals that incorporate Nazi themes in their plots, such as Marguerite (2008), Soldaat van Oranje (2010), and El diario de Ana Frank, un canto a la vida (2008), still await performances in Austria, this article focuses on the Austrian premieres of Cabaret, The Sound of Music, and The Producers in this chronological order.


17. In 1955, for instance, a council of ministers overturned Burgtheater director Alfred Rott’s decision to reopen the newly rebuilt house on the Ring with Goethe’s Egmont and ordered to have Grillparzer’s König Ottokars Glück und Ende to be played instead—on the grounds that it was more Austrian. This
anecdote subsumes the extent and scope of the ÖVP’s *Kulturnation* in a nutshell. For more background information on this debate, see Gerald Heidegger, “Ewig menschlich österreichisch,” ORF.at, September 12, 2010, accessed August 29, 2021. ↑


20. Ibid., 103. ↑


22. Today, only the *Amerika-Haus* in Vienna remains. The outlets in the federal states were closed in the 1950s and 1960s. Officially, the *Amerika-Häuser* were called United States Information Centers (USIC). ↑

23. Notice the unmistakable reference to the House Committee on Un-American Activities in the review of *Wonderful Town* quoted above, where the KPÖ’s influence clearly shines through in the veiled criticism of Senator McCarthy’s (1908–57) witch-hunt of communists in the United States. The critics insinuate that U.S. citizens might be less tolerant than Austrians, while at the same time holding on to their own nationalist ideologies. ↑


26. “Meeskite” (orig. Mieskeit) or “Miesnick” are Yiddish for “ugly person.” ↑

27. For more information on this controversy, see Scheiblhofer, “The Singing Nazi,” 148–50. ↑

28. Ibid., 150. ↑

29. Ibid., 222–24. ↑


32. Gotthard Böhm, “Es war leider nur peinlich: Deutschsprachige Erstaufführung von Cabaret im Theater an der Wien,” Die Presse, November 16, 1970, 4: “No matter how well-placed the claque was in best opera tradition, the applause did not come close to that for Anatevka.” Original wording: “Doch so raffiniert, nach guter alter Opernmethode, die Claque auch platziert war—der Applaus kam nicht in Anatevka-Nähe.” ↑


34. For an image of the election poster, see VGA: Verein für Geschichte der ArbeiterInnenbewegung: “Dr. Klaus—an echter Österreicher.” ↑


38. Gerhard Bronner, “Schon wieder ein Nazi-Stück?” Cabaret Program (Vienna: Theater an der Wien, 1970), [2]. Original wording: “Die Gefahr, welche von den Akteuren des Stückes ‘CABARET’ bewußt oder unbewußt ignoriert wird, ist fast analog zur Gefahr, in der wir uns heute befinden, und ebenso analog ist die Reaktion des größten Teils der Menschheit, soweit sie im Wohlstand lebt. ... Wenn Sie also heute ‘CABARET’ sehen, betrachten Sie es nicht als Tendenz-Stück, betrachten Sie es auch nicht als den Zwiespalt zwischen den guten und den bösen Menschen. Versuchen Sie das, was Sie sehen, auf unsere heutige Zeit zu projizieren! Wiegen Sie sich nicht mehr in der Scheinsicherheit, daß die Ihnen heute vorgeführte Bedrohung längst überwunden sei. Die Bedrohung ist heute stärker als je. ‘CABARET’ möge uns allen helfen, auf diese Bedrohung etwas richtiger zu reagieren.” Many thanks to Renate Rieder, head archivist at the Vereinigte Bühnen Wien, for making this text available to me. ↑


47. Böhm, “Es war leider nur peinlich,” 4. Unlike some of his U.S. colleagues, Böhm failed to recognize the similarities to Silcher’s setting of “Ich weiß nicht, was soll es bedeuten,” more commonly known as the “Lorelei.” For a more detailed discussion of this issue, see Scheibhoffer, “Tomorrow Belongs to Me,” 8-9. ↑

48. Klaus, “Einen ‘Oscar’ für die Aubrey.” ↑


51. Lothar Nesch, “Katastrophen passen nicht zum Musical: Deutschsprachige Erstaufführung von *Cabaret* an der Wien,” *Oberösterreichische Nachrichten*, November 19, 1970, 8. Original wording: “Da findet sich eine ältliche Jungfer mit einem Obsthändler, aber bei der Verlobungsfeier macht ein SA-Mann die Braut darauf aufmerksam, daß es nicht zweckmäßig wäre, einen Juden zu heiraten.” Nesch exaggerates here a bit and might conjure up the wrong image. While Ernst Ludwig is certainly a card-carrying, swastika-wearing member of the NSDAP, he does not show up in a storm trooper’s uniform, an image Nesch’s exaggeration might conjure up. ↑


58. Brunner, “Und man nimmt,” 10: “Unable to master the topic artistically, the authors content themselves with utilizing Nazism as a kind of stimulating backdrop. Thus, they rob themselves of their only chance to find something legitimately and compellingly new.” Original wording: “Dazu unfähig, das Thema künstlerisch zu bewältigen, bescheiden sich die Autoren damit, den Nazismus als eine Art Reizkulisse zu verwenden. Damit berauben sie sich der einzigen Chance, legitim und zwingend Neues zu finden.” ↑


63. The debate seems to flare up whenever an artist makes a foray in a new genre: Similar concerns were voiced ahead of the Broadway premieres of The Diary of Anne Frank (1955), The Sound of Music (1959), and Cabaret (1966). In the 1990s, Hollywood’s suitability to tell stories about the Shoah was challenged over Steven Spielberg’s (*1946) reliance on common Hollywood conventions in Schindler’s List (1993), which negated the singularity of the Holocaust; and when Roberto Benigni’s (*1952) La vita è bella (1997) was released, critics wondered whether the use of comedy qualified the Shoah. For more information, see Andreas Schmoller, “Die Darstellbarkeit der Shoah,” in Handbuch Jüdische Kulturgeschichte, ed. Zentrum für jüdische Kulturgeschichte der Universität Salzburg, accessed August 2, 2020.


66. Sam Mendes made this unequivocally clear for younger audiences at the end of his 1993 revival of Cabaret, when the Emcee reveals his concentration camp uniform beneath his clothes.


68. Rathkolb, Die paradoxe Republik, 51–52.

69. See Bailer, “They Were All Victims,” 107–11, for a detailed discussion about the many amendments this law required to improve reparations for Jewish victims.

70. Walden, “Broadway auf einem langen Weg,” 8: “Distance clouds historical perspectives more than time, which clarifies many a thing! Cabaret begins on New Year’s Eve, when the golden twenties in Berlin turned into the brown years of the following decade—as seen not only on the stage through the eyes of the American writer Clifford Bradshaw, who is on a literary expedition, but also from the point of view of the American authors, geared towards a simplifying musical effect.” Original wording: “Mehr als die Zeit—die manches viel klarer hervortreten läßt—trübt Entfernung historische Perspektiven! ‘Cabaret’ beginnt mit jener Silvesternacht, in der in Berlin die goldenen zwanziger Jahre in die braunen des folgenden Dezenniums übergehen, nicht nur auf der Bühne gesehen mit den Augen des amerikanischen Schriftstellers auf literarischer Entdeckungsreise Clifford Bradshaw, sondern auch durch die Brille der amerikanischen Autoren, auf vereinfachenden Musicaleffekt ausgerichtet.”

71. Brunner, “Und man nimmt,” 10: “It appears almost touching how Broadway tries to bring Berlin in the late twenties or early thirties to our minds. The local color could not be any more bland or wrong. Save for the occasionally mentioned Nollendorfplatz, one might think that Cabaret takes place in Berlin, New Hampshire.” Original wording: “Es mutet fast rührend an, wie uns der Broadway das Berlin der späten zwanziger oder frühen dreißiger Jahre gegenwärtig machen will. Farbloser und falscher könnte das Kolorit kaum sein. Wäre nicht hin und wieder vom Nollendorfplatz die Rede, so könnte man fast glauben, ‘Cabaret’ spiele in Berlin, New Hampshire.”


74. Walden, “Broadway auf einem langen Weg,” 8: “The worldwide export of Broadway musicals, which has gained momentum, resembles that of frozen goods a little bit: They are delivered seemingly ready made and only need to be defrosted.” Original wording: “Der in Schwung gekommene Broadway-Weltexport von Musicals gleicht ein wenig dem von tiefgekühlten Konserven: Man bekommt sie scheinbar fix und fertig geliefert und braucht sie nur aufzutauen.”

75. Brunner, “Und man nimmt,” 10: “Whoever dedicates themselves so exclusively to Broadway the way our Theater an der Wien does, certainly one of the best managed stages far and wide, must bear the risk of taking on a flop along with the chance of capitalizing on the big hits. This is not about the looming ‘turkeys’ of tryouts but rather about those run-of-the-mill products by cunning manufacturers, whose sole purpose it is to keep the cogwheels of show business turning. Cabaret is one of these products. And at the same time one of the most bizarre spawns of the entire genre.” Original wording: “Wer sich dem Broadway so ausschließlich verschreibt wie unser Theater an der Wien, ganz gewiss eine der bestgeführten Bühnen weit und breit, handelt mit der Chance, die großen Erfolge auszuschlachten, leider auch das Risiko ein, an den Pleiten teilzuhaben. Damit sind natürlich nicht jene Durchfälle (‘turkeys’) gemeint, die sich bereits bei den proviniellen Tryouts abzeichnen, sondern jene mittelmäßigen Fabrikate gerissener Konfektionäre, deren einzige Bestimmung es ist, das Räderwerk des Show Business in Gang zu halten. ‘Cabaret’ ist eines dieser Produkte. Und zugleich eine der absonderlichsten Hervorbringungen der ganzen Gattung.”

76. For more information on anti-Americanism and popular musical theater, see Grosch and Juchem, Broadwaymusicals, 12–15, 36–38, 64–67, 78–83, and 101–106; and Scheiblhofer, “Nachkriegspropaganda, Kulturimperialismus und Kulturkritik.”

77. Rathkolb, Paradoxe Republik, 240–41.


Schwierigkeiten, sich im Kloster unterzuordnen, bricht den militärischen Drill des Barons und flieht mit ihrer Familie vor den Nazis. Wir wollen da keine süße Person zeigen, sondern eine mutige. ↑


Koberg, “Edelbunte Edelweiße,” 16: “callous people, who turn under the direction of Hans Gratzer and Barbara Spitz into ever more apish Nazi henchmen, the closer the Anschluss gets.” Original wording: “stumpfe Volk, das sich in der Regie von Hans Gratzer und Barbara Spitz, je näher der Anschluss kommt, in desto affigere Nazi-Schergen verwandelt.” ↑


Kerschbaumer and Müller, Begnadet für das Schöne, 275–77. ↑

Oliver Rathkolb, for instance, discusses Mozart as the example of Austrian cultural export after 1950 in his contribution “Austriakischer Kulturexport” to Kerschbaumer’s chapter “Das musikalische Riesenrad,” in Kerschbaumer and Müller, Begnadet für das Schöne, 67–73. ↑

Koberg, “Edelbunte Edelweiße,” 16: “Johanna von Trapp, the only member of the seven-sibling choir living in Austria today, notes in her original contribution to the program notes for the Schauspielhaus that only The Sound of Music dramatized for the average American, ‘that we are not Germans but a peaceful and talented small nation in one of the most beautiful spots in Europe.’” Original wording: “Johanna von Trapp, das einzige heute in Österreich lebende Mitglied des siebenköpfigen Geschwisterchors, stellt in einem Originalbeitrag für das Programmheft des Schauspielhauses fest, daß erst ‘The Sound of Music’ für den Durchschnittsamerikaner dramatisierte, ‘daß wir keine Deutsche seien,
sondern eine friedfertige und begabte kleine Nation auf einem der schönsten Flecken Europas.’’


102. Rathkolb, Paradoxe Republik, 301.

103. Koberg, “Edelbunte Edelweiße,” 16: “The savior of Austria’s image in America is Baron von Trapp. On the day of the Anschluss, the former royal and imperial navy officer and patriot knows: ‘We’re standing at the open grave of Austria!’ Instead of joining the Wehrmacht, the family of nine emigrates to the USA and delights [people] there with Alpine folk tunes.” Original wording: “Der Retter von Österreichs Image in Amerika ist Baron von Trapp. Am Tag des Anschlusses weiß der ehemalige k. u. k. Marineoffizier und Patriot: ‘Wir stehen am offenen Grabe Österreichs!’ Statt zur deutschen Wehrmacht wandert die neunköpfige Familie in die USA aus und beglückt dort fortan mit alpenländischen Weisen.”


112. The Staatsoper Wien and Volksoper Wien are federally owned.


119. Anonymous, “Frehheit mit Hitler,” Vorarlberger Nachrichten, July 2, 2008, D6: “Whether Vienna absolutely needs two stages for musicals remains to be seen. In any case, the Vereinigte Bühnen Wien have decided to restore the Ronacher (at the expense of €46.8 million) in order to have a second house for musicals besides the Raimundtheater, after they lost the Theater and der Wien to opera.” Original wording: “Ob Wien unbedingt zwei Musical-Bühnen braucht, sei dahingestellt. Jedenfalls haben sich die Vereinigten Bühnen Wien nach dem ‘Verlust’ des Theaters an der Wien an die Oper, nun zu einer ‘Funktionssanierung’ des Ronacher (Kostenpunkt 46,8 Millionen Euro) entschlossen, um neben dem Raimundtheater ein zweites Musicals-Haus zu gewinnen.”


121. Thomas Trenkler, “’Völliges Chaos’ bei den Vereinigten Bühnen,” Der Standard, June 8, 2006, accessed


127. N., “Die Subvention wurde beschlossen.” ↑


Cover picture: Silhouette of a showgirl with hat splintering a swastika on the floor with a dancing stick, against the background of a collage of various newspaper reviews of the Austrian premieres of “The Sound of Music,” “Cabaret,” and “The Producers.”