



Soichiro Itoda. *Berlin and Tokyo: Theater and Capital City (Berurin to Tokyo - Gekijo to Toshi; Berlin und Tokyo: Theater und Hauptstadt)*. München: Iudicium-Verlag, 2008. Illustrations. 305 pp. EUR 58 (paper), ISBN 978-3-89129-654-7.

Reviewed by Friederike von Schwerin-High (Pomona College)

Published on H-Urban (September, 2009)

Commissioned by Alexander Vari

A Fragile Golden Age: Theater in Tokyo and Berlin between 1870 and 1930

In two modern metropolises, Tokyo and Berlin, the culture and politics of theater production and consumption underwent sweeping changes and experienced a golden age between the 1870s and the 1930s. Soichiro Itoda's engagingly written and beautifully designed book, *Berlin and Tokyo: Theater and Capital City (Berurin to Tokyo - Gekijo to Toshi; Berlin und Tokyo: Theater und Hauptstadt)* is a bilingual account of the theatrical and urban developments in the two capitals in those years. Presenting us with two collocated images, one depicting theatergoers in Tokyo's theater district, the other displaying the crowded interior of a summer theater in Berlin, and both operating with a similarly strictly observed vanishing point but with vastly divergent color schemes, the book cover visually announces what Itoda describes as his conceptual approach of contrastive comparativeness. Replicating this method of contrastive cross-comparisons, the main chapters alternate between subchapters dedicated to the various historical stages and thematic foci with regard to Berlin and Tokyo. All chapters are presented in German and Japanese, but the author notes that they are not designed to be read as literal translations of one another but rather as comparable treatments of the same subject.

Describing the overall cityscapes in the mid- to late 1800s, the first chapter sets the stage for more "dramatic" chapters that chart various historical developments, such as the dominance of certain dynastic theater families (the Cerf family in Berlin and the Nakamura, Ichimura, and Morita in Tokyo), the increasing operating freedom and commercialization of the theaters, the explosive expansion of audiences, and finally the decline of the commercial theater. The book consists of seven chapters. Chapter 1 considers the historical city borders and concentric rings (the city wall and city gates in the case of Berlin; the canals, trading posts, and religious temples in the case of Tokyo) as well as the strictly regulated court and dy-

nastic theater licensing system as it existed in the mid-nineteenth century. Chapter 2 addresses the emergence of much greater freedoms for the theater in both cities in the 1870s in the larger context of the general increase in free enterprise in both newly formed nation-states. Chapter 3 discusses the theater with respect to modern urban planning and fire safety. Bearing very similar titles, chapters 4 and 5 thematize the migration and multiplication of theater venues as modernization, urbanization, and metropolitan expansion set in. Chapter 6 considers the arrival of movie theaters in their function as rivals of, but also agents of symbiosis with, speech theaters. Chapter 7 investigates the boom years and fall of commercial theaters in both cities, placing particular emphasis on theater director Max Reinhardt's innovative and economically sagacious activities in Berlin and reactions to them in Tokyo.

Illustrations interspersed throughout each chapter, such as historical paintings and postcards, legal documents, floor plans, seating charts, tables, and maps give a vivid sense of the location, architecture, duration, and specific environments of the various theater venues. Included are also detailed diagrams that list and chart the officially recognized theaters that existed in both cities in any given year between 1850 and 1935, showing that in 1885 and in 1935 both cities coincided in possessing the same number of theaters, whereas in other years these numbers varied considerably, with Tokyo's graph less volatile and more steady than that of Berlin, even in spite of the earthquake that devastated Tokyo in 1923. Analyzing the demand for and supply of new kinds of theaters as direct results of the rapid population growth in the two cities, Itoda's account documents close connections between urbanization and theater reform. Due to a series of horrific fires in the large new theater venues, the initial deregulation and commercialization of the theaters in the 1870s were followed by the implementation of strict new

regulations regarding fire safety and hygienic standards for the larger theaters that could now seat eight hundred people and more. Iron curtains and emergency exits for fire safety were installed and the measurements of seats as well as air quality and air circulation became important topics in both German and Japanese theater discussion and legislation. The Lessing-Theater in Berlin and the Kabukiza Theater in Tokyo were built according to new specification with an eye to delivering high-quality theater performances to large metropolitan audiences. In addition, numerous new commercial neighborhood theaters sprang up and were frequently forced into a series of relocations and restructurings, in the rapidly emerging and dynamically changing outskirt neighborhoods with their large new working-class populations.

After surveying a range of infrastructural givens and developments (jurisdictional changes, emergence of large-scale public transportation, increased population density and mobility, and improvements in fire safety that contributed to the changes in theater organization and production), Itoda outlines the rise of limited partnerships and joint ventures in the theater systems of both cities. Each short subchapter offers a succinct overview written in a sophisticated, yet accessible style. The short individual entries, bearing such concrete titles as “Reactions to Max Reinhardt in Tokyo’s theater world,” “Mori Ogai’s considerations regarding the demands for theater reform,” “The development of the railway system in Berlin and Tokyo,” or “Commercial theater at the abyss,” allow for quick orientation and focused reading, making the book also a suitable reference work. With these short individual entries that, though well contextualized and cross-referenced, can be read as stand-alone entries, the study will serve as an excellent textbook as well. It is regrettable, however, that no general index is provided and the bibliographical references are all kept in the form of footnotes with no comprehensive bibliography at the end of the book. While the lucidly written, short chapters read well, their shortness sometimes leads to only a brief mention of a particular development, leaving one curious about further implications and ramifications of the facts presented. For example, discussing public transportation in Tokyo, Itoda mentions that some of its specifications were based on the city train system in Berlin, but does not go into detail.

In several chapters, fewer pages are devoted to the situation in Tokyo and the inclusion there of comparative material would have been welcome, for example, on the question whether unemployment in Tokyo had a similar effect on the theater as it did in Berlin. But as the author notes in his conclusion, fewer historical records are rou-

tinely kept in Tokyo’s governmental offices, a remarkable fact that has become a comparative research subject in its own right for Itoda, who has embarked on a scholarly investigation of diverging archiving cultures. Consequently, Itoda used different types of sources for his chapters on Berlin and those on Tokyo. The Berlin chapters draw overwhelmingly on original archival materials (gathered in archives in Berlin and Postdam), while the chapters on Tokyo rely on various cultural histories of Tokyo, primarily published in the 1980s and including studies by Terunobu Fujimori, Susumu Kurosawa, Yoshihiro Kurata, Hidenobu Jinnai, and Tahashi Moriya. In addition to historical sources, Itoda consulted recent histories of Berlin theater by Wolfgang Jansen, Rudolf Lorenzen, and Ruth Freydank, and of early film by Michael Hanisch. A dialogue with more general recent cultural urban histories, such as Peter Fritzsche’s *Reading Berlin 1900* (1996) would have been interesting, considering that in Fritzsche’s study, Berliners are cast as spectators, while the city is conceived of in terms of a spectacle. It would be informative to learn how such conceptualizations might intersect with Itoda’s portrayals and whether contemporary theater plots focused on the modern city, in other words, whether at the theater Berlin reflected on and represented itself as a stage setting or character. Similar questions could be asked of modernist Tokyo. However, Itoda does include some good overviews of the contemporary theater repertoires, even though these are not the main emphases of his book.

Particularly illuminating is the wide range of personal and official eyewitness reports Itoda brought together, often quoting verbatim passages. Recording the new developments in the city at large and in theater culture, some of the chroniclers consisted of local residents, private citizens, satirists, and guidebook writers, while others were visitors from Japan to Berlin or from Germany to Tokyo. A strong sense of modernization-induced exhilaration is palpable in both sets of residents and the visitors who comprised members of state and trade delegations; theater people; cultural observers from Europe commenting on theater practices in Tokyo; and Japanese professors, business people, or literati sojourning in Berlin and famously including author and physician, Mori Ogai. These fascinating glimpses into the history of the relationship and interaction between the two metropolises demonstrate that modernization and theater experimentation away from traditional forms were results of and propellants for increasing internationalization. In his sourcebook *Twentieth Century Theater*, Richard Drain posits that “for European Theater the [twentieth] century began with the discovery

of the Japanese.”[1] This discovery, according to Drain, marked the arrival of the theater in an age of global dialogue. Itoda surveys some of the more troubling aspects of cultural transfer as they presented themselves in the enthusiastic reception by Western audiences of the grossly misinforming international “Japanese Village” exhibit, a mixture of trade show and circus performance, in the 1880s. Itoda’s seventh chapter ends with the sadly prophetic report of a Japanese theater businessman, Toyokichi Hata, who had spent the entire decade of the 1920s in Berlin and returned in 1933 to a depressing, anti-Semitic theater scene, which had been deprived of its former liveliness and diversity and of such former stars as Reinhardt.

Itoda’s approach of contrastive comparison succeeds in throwing into sharp relief the intricate fabric of sometimes strikingly similar and sometimes curiously divergent theater phenomena and political, social, and infrastructural control mechanisms in each culture at particular points in time. For instance, with the arrival of ever more forms of mass entertainment, increasingly varied kinds of permits and licensures were drawn up in Berlin, with the result that initially only institutions with serious artistic credentials could gain permission to call themselves “theaters.” In Tokyo, by contrast, all types of performance, whether film screenings, circus acts, theater productions, or variety shows, fell under the same rules and regulations. Yet, as Itoda notes, cultural attitudes in Tokyo did not line up with these legal realities: self-respecting stage actors found it initially beneath themselves to act in films for an unruly, indecorous audience. Nonetheless, the overall acceptance of film in Japan occurred in a smoother manner than elsewhere, which Itoda attributes to the long-standing Japanese artistic tradition of *kage’e*, the practice of projecting moving shadow pictures against large screens made of Japanese rice paper. Itoda also mentions the relatively strong role of the declaiming narrators in both traditional and early

film performances in Japanese performing media. *Ren-sageki*, a genre that mixed spoken theatrical performance with film projection, was very popular between 1905 and 1934 (when the talkies made their debut). However, in Berlin the situation changed drastically in the 1920s due to the unemployment of actors. Now cinemas gained permission to double as speech theaters, and “live theater” was defined much more liberally, encompassing any “story that had a point” represented by humans on a stage. Erwin Piscator’s shows, moreover, successfully combined film projection with live theater.

In summary, Itoda employs two main methods of juxtaposition, each of which yields noteworthy results: the method of contrastive comparison, which lays bare that similar developments in the two urban settings and theater cultures occasioned quite different reactions and countercurrents; and the method of investigation into mutual perceptions and reciprocal influences, which by analyzing eyewitness reports contribute to a historical account of cultural transfer. Including a whole host of original charts and tables, beautifully reproduced illustrations, and archival textual materials, this multidisciplinary book will make indispensable reading for cultural comparatists, theater scholars, urban and architectural historians, and students of the Meiji, Taishō, Wilhelmine, and Weimar periods. An exemplary local historic as well as cross-cultural study, it will furthermore serve as a model for others who venture into writing metropolis-specific, comparative theater histories for the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. One would hope that the translational, transnational format of this remarkable bilingual study will inspire translations into English and other languages in the near future to gain it an even larger international readership, which it richly deserves.

Note

[1]. Richard Drain, *Twentieth-Century Theater: A Sourcebook* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 291.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:

<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

Citation: Friederike von Schwerin-High. Review of Itoda, Soichiro, *Berlin and Tokyo: Theater and Capital City (Berurin to Tokyo - Gekijo to Toshi; Berlin und Tokyo: Theater und Hauptstadt)*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. September, 2009.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=23515>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.