

CHAPTER III

THE SPIRITUAL SOURCES OF REINHARDT

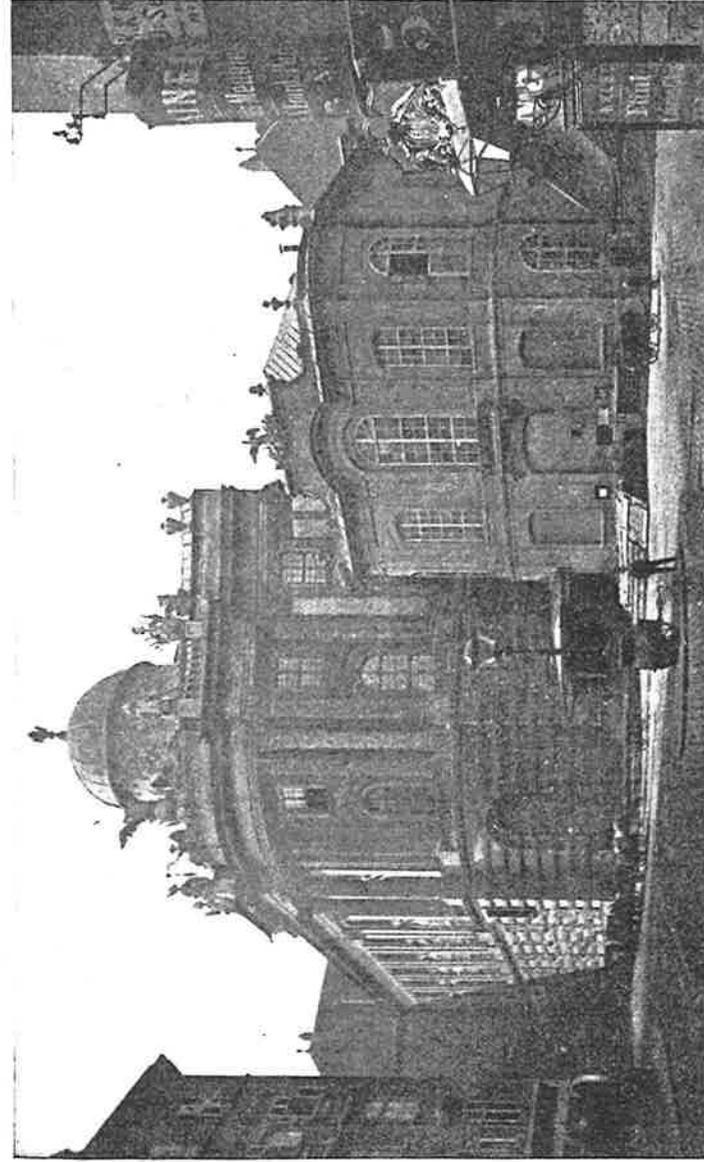
BY HERMANN BAHR

(English Translation by Mrs. Frank E. Washburn-Freund)

[Back of every personal force, whether national or international, lies a fund of spiritual vitality on which drafts may be made in emergencies and which serves constantly as subconscious guide and preceptor. It may be literary or artistic ancestry, the formative influence of another great personality in youth, or the potent atmosphere of an old, established but still vigorous community.

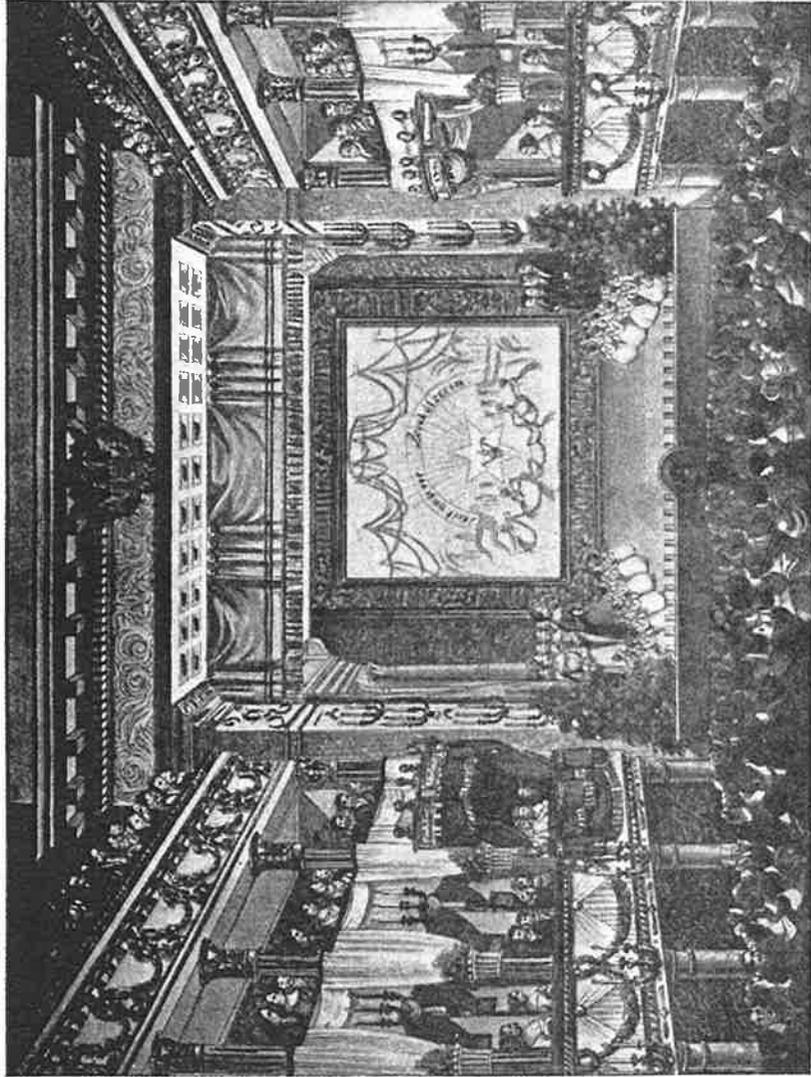
It is the latter stimulus which has served in the case of Reinhardt—the urbane, dignified, exacting and ever-alert civilization which belongs peculiarly to the Vienna in which Reinhardt spent his early years. But if Vienna was the spiritual parent of Reinhardt, giving him poise, tradition, taste, an appreciation of the joy of life, Berlin was his foster-parent, a spiritual force no less potent but coarser-grained and more vigorous, instilling in him the ambition and the technique of putting to practical and concrete use the finer impulses of his earlier inheritance. No one is better fitted than the genial, conversational, shaggy-headed Hermann Bahr to analyse and trace to their fountain-heads these two impacts on Reinhardt. Viennese himself by habitat, but also citizen of a world which includes not only the German capital but our own metropolis through production of such plays as “The Concert,” and gifted with the knack of summoning a startlingly truthful picture,

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THE OLD BURG THEATRE, VIENNA

In the Gallery of This Venerable Old Playhouse, Nestled in a Niche of the Rambling Hofburg until Its Demolition in December, 1888, to Make Room for an Imposing Gateway, the Youthful Reinhardt Obtained His First Inspiration for His Dramatic Career



THE JOSEFSTÄDTER THEATER, VIENNA
An Interior View of Reinhardt's Latest Theatrical Home, from an Old Print. With a Coöperative Company of His Best Actors, He Plans a Revival Here of the Formal Theatre of the *Commedia dell'Arte*

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whether by fact or by fanciful anecdote, he is well equipped to depict the background which formed and molded the youthful Reinhardt and started him on his career.—THE EDITOR.]

I HAVE known Max Reinhardt ever since he began his career in Berlin. For twenty years I have watched him with the curiosity of the psychologist who closely observes every single trait in a man, in order to try to draw his innermost secrets from him. I have been with him in various and changing relationships, so that I have always been able to see him from different sides and in different lights. I was already well-known and he just beginning to be known when we first met. I was a dramatic critic at that time, and his attitude toward me was that of reverential distrust which the actor always assumes before the critic. Afterwards, he produced some of my plays and I watched him staging them. Later on, he engaged me for a time to stage a few productions. And once we even worked together in Venice. We lay for hours on the hot sand of the Lido, and while the waves surged on the shore beside us, he staged for me the whole play of "Julius Caesar" with little balls of sand.

From all these experiences, I know that he is a man of tremendous unity of purpose. At the first glance he seems to be a born impressionist, receptive of every sensation, absorbing everything greedily, inhaling every stimulating breath, but also assimilating it with every fibre of his being, till the fleeting impression is transformed into his own expression. He listens to everyone. No one could be a better listener. But he himself is a silent man. He hardly ever contradicts because he has

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no need to be on the defensive, so firm and strong are his inward convictions as to the message he has to deliver. He can go into any venture calmly because he knows that he will always find his way back to himself with new courage. He winds his way upwards in a great spiral, as it were, as sure and confident of himself as a somnambulist. The first theatre he had when he began his career, sometimes resembled a cabaret. Later it was a circus. Then he played in the open in a great public square before masses of people. And finally it was in a Roman Catholic church, one of the most beautiful baroque churches in the world. But in cabaret or circus, in public square or church, he is always the same: the kindly nature with the magic gift of being able to see the hidden meaning behind appearances. As Theseus says in "A Midsummer Night's Dream," he has

"Such shaping phantasies, that apprehend
"More than cool reason ever comprehends."

Vienna, the spiritual cradle of this impressionist, is a true theatre city. The delight in dancing and mirth is bred and born in the Austrian. For generations the Austrian peasant has been accustomed to some form of acting. Even their native dance, the "schuhplattler," and their doggerel verse, the "schnadahüpfel," already contain a kernel of the drama. The church soon took advantage of this inborn love for the theatre and the result was the Church Plays, mimic representations of religious stories: as, for example, "The Birth of Christ," "The Three Kings," "Lazarus and the Rich Man," and so on. Even today, in the secluded little valleys of the Austrian moun-

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tains, these same religious plays can be seen, performed with all the simple touching reverence of the old days, mixed with the same rough horse-play and coarse wit. The Benedictine monks made use of this old custom in the schools; and, on feast days and holidays, tragedies by Seneca were performed in Latin by the pupils before the assembled teachers and the proud and happy parents. Strange, how history repeats itself!

The Jesuits pushed this tradition still farther and developed it into something really imposing. The result was the baroque theatre, which had in no sense a private character. It was actually a state affair, a public dramatic festival in honor of the Emperor, given by the highest clergy and nobility. On this occasion, everyone—author, architect, painter, actor, lighting mechanic, master of fireworks, dancer, singer, clown—competed in friendly rivalry to show their arts to the best advantage. The performances took place out-of-doors on a stage erected in the largest square of the city. And the whole population, young and old, rich and poor, men and women, were invited to be present.

In the seventeenth century, these performances became more and more important, to the grief and vexation of the Minister of Finance, because they cost enormous sums of money. For instance, a single performance for the Emperor Carl VI ran to the stately figure of 60,000 gulden. Three Hapsburg emperors—Ferdinand III, Joseph I, and Carl VI, all three passionate musicians also—were so fervently devoted to the theatre that they sometimes seemed to forget the less diverting duties of governing. These were the great times of the theatre, the times

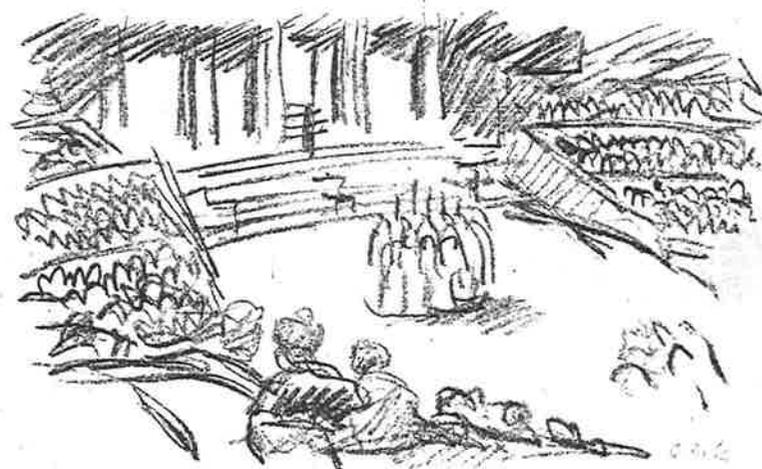
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when it was not merely an amusement house but held almost the same proud position as the theatre in Athens at the time of Pericles. In other words, it was a state affair. In any case, it was something that the whole people—the finest courtier as well as the merest vagabond—considered of greater interest than anything else. And these great times, although long since departed, are still alive today, deep down in the secret heart of every Viennese man and woman.

Theatre-going is, for the Viennese, not merely an amusement, a way of passing the time. It is the centre around which their intellectual life revolves. And even to the most frivolous Viennese, who is never serious about anything, the theatre is holy ground. Thus it happens that even now, in Vienna, every question concerning the theatre receives the greatest attention and is discussed with passion, devotion, or bitterness, according to the merits of the case and the temperament of the debaters. To the outsider, this is as hard to understand as is the importance of the Burg Theater to the Viennese, for only the Viennese themselves or someone who has lived for long years in Vienna—better still in old Vienna—can truly appreciate its significance.

What Olympia was to Greece, what the Circus was to Imperial Rome, what the court life was to the France of Louis XIV, that was what the Burg Theater meant to Vienna until about thirty years ago. To obtain a seat at a performance, the young people would betake themselves to the theatre at four o'clock every afternoon, where they would wait, packed like sardines, until the doors to their paradise were at last opened. The stairs were disposed

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TWO SCENES FROM "ŒDIPUS REX"

AT THE ZIRKUS SCHUMANN, NOVEMBER, 1910

From Original Lithographs by Emil Orlik



"THE ORESTEIA" BY ÆSCHYLUS
IN THE ZIRKUS SCHUMANN, BERLIN, OCTOBER, 1911

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of breathlessly, three steps at a time, in order to get a "good" place in the gallery, i. e., a little corner where, in a precarious position, hanging forward rather than standing, they could snatch a slanting view of the performance. They knew the plays almost by heart, and when one of the lesser parts was given to a newcomer, excitement was at fever heat for days before. For every spectator had the exact intonation in his ear with which each single word had always been spoken, and woe to the new impersonator if the smallest point missed its expected effect! Bloody and bitter battles were often fought in the Olympus of the Burg Theater. Friends or enemies sealed life-long compacts. And if a marriage had "been arranged" up there, it was safe to assume that Fate would pour blessings on the happy couple with a lavish hand.

Things remained like this until well into the nineties of the last century. In the meantime, Vienna had grown, had begun to have new interests, had even gradually taken to politics. A new generation had arrived who were unable to understand how anyone could, as it were, live and die only in the Burg Theater. But just at this time of threatening murmurs against the reign of the Burg Theater, changing Vienna, startled, gathered together for the last time all the tenderness it had inherited for the Burg Theater from its fathers, realizing that it was now slowly saying farewell to the old place forever. And just that feeling added a gentle sorrow to the traditional admiration, for all knew that they were watching the twilight of the Burg Theater, and this knowledge lent a brilliancy to these performances which could never be forgotten. Among the "gods" in the gallery of the Burg Theater at

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that time, was a poor Austrian who had just come to Vienna in search of luck. His name was Max Reinhardt.

Soon after, Reinhardt made his first appearance on the stage. At that time, Vienna was, in fact, still so much of a theatre city that, among others, it had a theatre that did not live on the kind patrons who went to the theatre to see, but on the actors who wished to be *seen*. This theatre was in one of the suburbs, and its manager not only gave his actors no salaries but let them pay *him* for graciously permitting them to play. Each rôle had its own price. And in this theatre Max Reinhardt played his first part. Schiller's "Die Räuber" ("The Robbers") was the play. He would probably have given his life to have been able to appear as Carl or at least Franz Moor, but his life would not have satisfied the manager who demanded cash down, and all the ready cash the young Austrian could command was just enough to buy him the rôle of Spiegelberg. From that evening, he gave himself up to the theatre body and soul.

At first he had no luck. Then he got an engagement in Salzburg for small rôles. Salzburg at that time was a quiet little provincial town that went to sleep for the winter and only wakened up for summer and tourists. With the latter, by chance, came Otto Brahm, on his journey to Gastein. Brahm at that time was at the height of his fame. Fifteen years before, he had started in Berlin as a journalist and had fought bravely for Ibsen. In 1889, following the example of Antoine in Paris, he had founded the *Freie Bühne* and was the first to fight for Gerhart Hauptmann. Then in 1895, he had taken over the management of the Deutsches Theater in Berlin.

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So here was Brahm in Salzburg, and since it was raining, as it generally does in Salzburg, he let himself be persuaded by some friends, out of pure boredom, to go to the theatre to see a much-lauded "star" hero about whom the whole town was raving. He would most likely engage the star on the spot, his Salzburg friends assured him, for such great talent had not been seen on the German stage for decades. He went. But after the first scene he had already had enough of the star, for he found him impossible and was on the point of getting up to leave the theatre when something in the bearing of one of the young actors, cast for a very small rôle, caught his attention. The young man was awkward and embarrassed and seemed not yet to be able either to walk or stand on the stage. Yet there was something characteristic and individual about him that pleased Brahm. He sent for the young actor the next day, and engaged him on the spot for the Deutsches Theater in Berlin, never suspecting that the young man would soon be his most dangerous rival and, in fact, would be his successor in the management of the Deutsches Theater. For this awkward young actor of small unimportant parts was none other than Max Reinhardt, now director of the Salzburg Festival Theatre and master of the Castle of Leopoldskron. In such queer ways does Fate wind her threads.

With Reinhardt's arrival in Berlin, we might almost say that his life only really began. Looking backward from today, there was something providential in the move. For Reinhardt brought with him to Berlin, at that time a new theatre city, something that it lacked, something that it needed; while in Berlin Reinhardt found what he lacked

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and what he needed. If in those years, he had not gone with Brahm to Berlin but had obtained an engagement in Vienna instead, his talent would certainly have been recognized there, too, and quickly enough, for the Viennese can pick out talent at first sight. The trouble is, it takes them years to acknowledge it. They have too much of the spoilt, blasé "*grand seigneur*" in them to let a man notice that they need him. In Vienna it is not so much talent as such that counts, but the particular talent of being able to wait. And much as Reinhardt can do, it is just exactly "wait" that he can not do. In his youth especially, he was possessed by a consuming impatience which did not make for rest, either for himself or for those about him. And just this quality seemed to have made Fate predestine him for Berlin. For the Berlin to which he came was no longer the Berlin that Bismarck knew, that felt itself content and secure in its old Prussian traditions and its past. Still less was it the romantic Berlin of E. T. A. Hoffmann. No. It was an entirely new Berlin, a city that had shot up over night and was being impelled forward, ever forward, with a consuming impatience something like Reinhardt's own.

In those days when, of an evening, a few Berliners foregathered to have a good time together, they were hardly seated before they were asking: "Well, what shall we do now?" It actually seemed as if the entertainment of the evening consisted in dropping into a different café every half hour on an average, to discuss the vital question: "Where shall we go now?" Evidently a real thrill was induced by every change of café. And it was the same way in intellectual matters. Danger as well as strength lay

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"A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM"

AT THE GROSSES SCHAUSPIELHAUS, APRIL, 1921

A Costume Plate for Puck by Max Rée

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in the haste with which Wilhelmian Berlin unceasingly "changed the café," whether the "café" were philosophy, art, or even religion. If you had seated a Berliner of those days at the altar of any new art, after five minutes he would say: "Well, what shall we do? Where shall we go now? "And during the twenty years of his sojourn in Berlin, Reinhardt was always ready with a prompt answer to this perpetual question.

To begin with, Reinhardt made Berlin into a theatre city again. Not that it had never been so before: it had been, in the time of Iffland. Those were the days when the Hamburg Theatre, the Berlin Schauspielhaus, and the Vienna Burg Theater, vied with each other in importance, in giving the stamp of style, and in influence that reached beyond the merely artistic to the moral fibre of the nation. Then came fifty years during which all the talent and all the interest of Berlin became more and more absorbed by politics, and only after the German Empire was completed in the form Bismarck had shaped for it, did the Germans gradually remember the duties they owed to art. It was to a moment of such artistic introspection that the Deutsches Theater in Berlin owed its existence.

The Deutsches Theater was founded in 1883, for national reasons, with perhaps a somewhat jealous glance at the Comédie Française and the Burg Theater. Berlin wished to show that what Paris and Vienna could do, she could do also. And by founding the Deutsches Theater, she wished to give herself the stamp of legitimacy, so to speak, as the cultural capital of Germany. She forgot, however, that theatres can not be raised at the word of command; that they must grow gradually; that they need

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a fine tradition. In Vienna, thanks to the old church plays and the baroque period, influenced by the Benedictines, the Jesuits, and the Hapsburg emperors, a great tradition already existed in the air, as it were, for every child to absorb. It could be detected in their marionette theatres and Punch and Judy shows. Even in bad times, when the work of the theatres in Vienna was on the downward path, the tradition remained as strong as ever, because it was still alive in the heart of the public, although the stage seemed, for a time, to have lost it. In Berlin, not only did the theatre lack such a deeply-rooted tradition, but, above all, it was lacking in a public. In fact, it can be said quite truly that "Berlin lacked a public." A heterogeneous mass of people gathered together in a theatre by chance is not a public. For the actors of the Deutsches Theater of those days, the task was made doubly hard, for they had to create for themselves a new public every night. A real public can come into being only when the mass of strangers begins to feel that it is not a company but one entity in which one heart beats; when each person ceases to be himself, gives up his own feelings, and becomes one with all the others.

On the whole, it might be true to say that Reinhardt's greatest achievement did not consist so much in what he accomplished on the stage as in his success in creating a Berlin public. Through that, the theatre in the highest sense of the word was made possible again in Berlin. His most beautiful stage settings would not have made half the impression they did if he had not, first of all, "staged" a real audience. All truly creative men of the theatre have always held that the theatre does not consist exclu-

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"A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM"

AT THE GROSSES SCHAUSPIELHAUS, APRIL, 1921

A Costume Plate for Oberon by Max Rée

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sively of authors and actors, but that it can do its work only if and when the audience plays, too. Schröder in Hamburg, Goethe in Weimar, Iffland in Berlin, Schreyvogel, Laube, Dingelstedt, and finally Burckhard and Mahler in Vienna, were not only trainers of their actors; they were also the greatest trainers of their audiences. They created the audience they needed, made of it an instrument so sensitive that they knew they could use it, as well as their actors, to give full expression to their art. Therein lies the secret of Reinhardt's phenomenal influence in Berlin, his almost magic power over a city otherwise mockingly superior and with little talent for enthusiasm.

As a matter of fact, Reinhardt was really predestined by Fate for the Burg Theater. But it was so arranged in the Austria of Franz Joseph, that a man could become anything except what Fate had ordained him to be. The great ambition of Austria was not to let itself be talked into anything by Fate. In that country a state official was more than Fate. In fact, state officials made Austria, and Fate had to be content to take a back seat. So there was nothing for Reinhardt to do but to make his foreordained Burg Theater in Berlin, instead of in his own country.

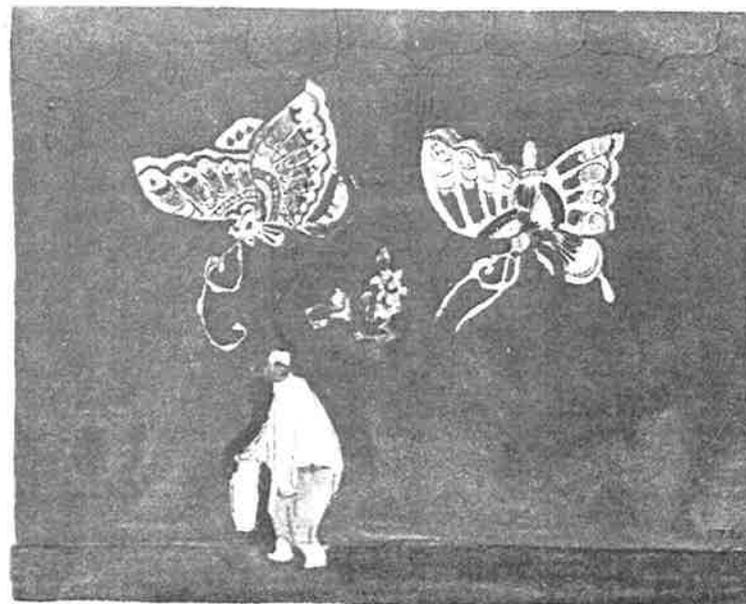
Reinhardt brought with him to Berlin what Berlin needed: an old and firmly-rooted tradition, while Berlin gave him in exchange the confidence, the quick pulse, the eager daring, the impatience and love of adventure of a young, selfish city, willing to take any risks. Only in Berlin could it have been possible to do the work of half a century in about fifteen years.

Reinhardt began in the Kleines Theater on Unter den

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Linden. There never was a smaller theatre: it could hardly even be called a hall. Nevertheless, the whole of Berlin was forthwith declaring that the only right place for plays was a room. A decade later, the same Berlin was declaring that real plays were possible only in a circus. Thus perfectly did Reinhardt and Berlin understand each other. It seemed almost as if the one had been waiting for the other. And just because they were, and, as a matter of fact, still are, strangers to each other at heart, they supplement each other so happily. On his arrival in Berlin, Reinhardt found a style of acting which had developed since the eighties of the last century, as the result of the war waged by naturalistic Young Germany, under the influence of Antoine and his *Théâtre Libre* in Paris, against the empty, declamatory Court-Theatre manner. This development was hastened through playing Ibsen, Arno Holz and Gerhart Hauptmann's first pieces. The main characteristics of the new style were great objectivity, complete subordination of the actor to the author, and a drab, colorless honesty that went so far as to avoid all dramatic effects. Nevertheless, as a cure for the bad tricks of "virtuosity" and for weaning the actors from meaningless posing, this style turned out to be a blessing for the German stage. And if, at bottom, the result was only negative, still, it can not be denied that it rendered service by sweeping away abuses and thus making a real art of playing possible again. This style, however, had not, in itself, the strength to create a new art of the theatre in response to the continuous and impetuous demand of the public. In naturalistic plays it was able to cover up its weakness, but when it ventured

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"TURANDOT" BY GOZZI-VOLLMOELLER

DEUTSCHES THEATER, OCTOBER, 1911

Two Designs by Ernst Stern for Silk Drop Curtains

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into the province of the classical drama, its impotence at once became apparent. Brahm himself knew this very well and tried to find a style beyond the naturalistic which could be used for the classics also. But he did not succeed. It remained for Reinhardt to achieve that feat.

In the first years of his career, Reinhardt had been entirely a naturalistic actor, but he had too clear an eye, too much imagination, too much inborn longing for movement, change, surprise, to tolerate for any length of time the monotony and drabness of naturalism. Then unexpected help came to him from quite a different quarter: from the young painters. Everywhere in the Germany of that time, secessions from the academies were taking place, led by the impressionists. But the latter were soon pushed aside by the impetuous demand for a decorative style. In Munich the "Jugend style" and in Vienna the "Wiener Werkstätte" came into being. A riot of youthful brightness took possession of the homes, and this new colorful scheme of interior decoration was, one might say, the prelude to Reinhardt's stage settings, for, with his ever-receptive eye, he was quick to perceive the great and fundamental change this kind of decorative art could work in the theatre.

This knowledge is the secret of Reinhardt's fame. His work may be summed up in these words: Taking over from Brahm the new naturalistic style of the young modern painters, he gained, by this union of the two arts, a wealth, breadth, and depth of expression that equipped him equally well for the Greek drama and for the classical and naturalistic plays. Not only that: He could stage wordless plays, operas, and operettas by the same meth-

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ods. Thus he had arrived at the same point as the long-forgotten baroque producers of two hundred years ago. If his work gives the impression of being so startling and new, we must not forget that it is, in reality, the grand old baroque tradition of two centuries ago come back to life in him, a tradition that sums up in itself the whole art of the Middle Ages. Even in his first decisive Berlin success—the production of “A Midsummer Night’s Dream”—he had used, as if in a dream, the baroque tradition, having pressed *all* the arts into the service of the stage and once more freed the theatre from the tyranny of the spoken word, whose slave it had been for at least a hundred years. For the actor had become, more and more, a mere speaker of words, and blank verse ruled the German stage. One might almost say that the theatre was no longer a theatre, that it was not there for seeing but only for hearing words, for listening to the recitation of verses apportioned among different rôles. For this, the actor had to thank the so-called “regular play,” which appeared soon after the demise of the baroque theatre. Contrary to the baroque play, this “regular play” was not one which grew organically out of *all* the arts and their friendly rivalry. It was, rather, the work of the author alone, the outcome of his poetic conception, entrusted solely to the vehicle of the writer: the spoken word. Briefly, a spoken work. The healthy instinct of the people had always secretly rebelled against the sway of blank verse and the spoken word. And, for that reason, the people were hardly ever to be seen in the bourgeois theatres, which gradually became more and more exclusive and finally

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were considered the special property of the “intellectuals” and “high-brows.”

It was Reinhardt who first ended the sway of this literary play. He made the theatre, which, for a time, had become the exclusive domain of the art of speaking, once more the common property of *all* the arts. In this he is a direct follower of Richard Wagner, because each one of his productions is a “*Gesamtkunstwerk*” (the joint work of *all* the arts). That explains his unequalled importance for the German stage. He has fought the tyranny of the mere word, and prevailed. The theatre is no longer simply the intellectual enjoyment of the “elect”; it appeals to all the senses because it calls into action *all* the powers inherent in man.