

Marvin Carlson

Contemporary Censorship Debates in Germany

During the past five years the cultural world in Germany has been shaken and divided by a series of controversies involving contemporary works of art charged with being anti-Semitic. Obviously, with the Holocaust continuing to occupy a major position in modern German consciousness and history, sensitivity to anti-Semitic expressions is particularly keen here. This sensitivity has been increased by a number of recent developments, including the growing visibility of far-right political groups, the rise of the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement (BDS) protesting Israeli treatment of the Palestinians, and the official politicization of these tensions by a parliamentary ruling in 2015 restricting the activities of the BDS. The conflict between legitimate criticism of policies of the Israeli state and legitimate censorship of ethnically offensive material has recently become increasingly bitter in Germany. This article discusses the dynamics of three of the most significant recent examples: the conflict involving Germany's most prestigious arts festival, the Kassell documenta in 2020; the withdrawal in 2022 of the European Drama Award, the continent's largest award, from British dramatist Caryl Churchill; and the withdrawal from the Munich stage of the most recent play by Wajdi Mouawad, who has been widely heralded in Germany as the most significant contemporary dramatist.

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AS THE MOST social of the arts, theatre has been a traditional target for censorship, especially by autocratic regimes sensitive to any expression of dissent. On the whole, modern liberal democracies have prided themselves on allowing freedom of expression, particularly in the case of such potentially disturbing voices as that of the theatre. Under these circumstances, a series of events in recent German theatre, presumably free of such concerns, has stimulated widespread discussion and concern there.

Although controversy is certainly nothing new to the German theatre – indeed, challenging social, cultural, and artistic norms is a significant part of German theatre culture – nothing in recent times has equalled the

intensity of the debate surrounding the programming of the 2020 edition of the documenta Festival in Kassell.¹ Behind the controversy, and explaining both its intensity and its symbolic importance, lies one of the most difficult and intractable tensions of the decades-old Israeli–Palestinian conflict, in which Germany is understandably more deeply and emotionally involved than any other European nation. Despite occasional awkwardnesses over the matter of reparations, Germany over the decades has developed what it calls a 'special relationship' with Israel, and with the international rise of the political far right in the twenty-first century in Germany and elsewhere, the German government has been, understandably, particularly

sensitive to any suggestions of anti-Semitism in cultural or political discourse. The tensions sharply increased from 2017 onward, due to the activities of the BDS (Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions) organization, an international movement founded in Palestine in 2005 and dedicated to altering Israel's policies concerning the Palestinians through strategies developed to protest apartheid in South Africa. The increasing importance of far-right political parties, documented by the national newspaper *Die Welt*, and the rhetoric of certain BDS material, which suggested to some the language of fascism, caused increasing reaction against BDS by mainstream German politicians. In September 2017, the city of Frankfurt closed all public spaces to BDS activities and revoked any public subsidies to organizations supporting the movement. Later that year, Munich, Bonn, and Berlin passed similar legislation and/or cancelled BDS events.²

Debate over BDS boycotts became particularly prominent in Berlin, and since this was the German city most involved with international cultural events, the sponsors and nationality of individual participants and the content of their presentations became matters of increasing concern in the second decade of the new century. A particular target was the Pop-Kultur Festival, begun in 2015, which BDS opposed because the Berlin Israeli Embassy was among the festival's sponsors. This phase of the controversy culminated in May 2019, when BDS called for artists, music fans, and broadcasters to boycott the upcoming Eurovision Song Contest final in Tel Aviv, which BDS argued attempted to 'whitewash' Israel's treatment of the Palestinians. In response, the German parliament passed a resolution on 17 May condemning such calls in general, and those of BDS in particular, as discriminatory and anti-Semitic.³

This by no means settled the matter, especially in Germany's theatre community. In 2020 over fifty German cultural leaders issued a statement that condemned both the BDS policy of boycotting cultural events and the Bundestag resolution, which unhelpfully responded to the boycott with another boycott. Among the theatre-related institutions

which prepared this statement were the Berliner Festspiele; the Hebbel am Ufer; Hellerau; the Deutsches Theater of Berlin; the Goethe-Institut; the Haus der Kulturen der Welt; the Deutsche Bühnenverein; the Düsseldorfer Schauspielhaus; the Theater der Welt Festival; the Munich Kammerspiele; the Nationaltheater Mannheim; the Schauspiel Köln; the Staatsschauspiel Dresden; and the Thalia in Hamburg – along with a number of prominent Jewish cultural institutions.⁴

This general unity among German cultural institutions in condemning the heavy-handedness of both the BDS and Bundestag actions did not last long, however. A major new cultural conflict erupted in 2021 with repercussions that were much more far-ranging and divisive. This involved 'documenta', a major international art show held every five years in Kassel, an event rivalling the Venice Biennale in importance and visibility. The previous edition of the festival, held in 2017 in both Kassel and Athens, was not devoid of controversy, opponents accusing the organizers of colonialism and celebrating neoliberal ideology.⁵ Still, the rising tensions over anti-Semitism in Germany made it almost inevitable that this concern would arise with new intensity in the 2022 edition.

Indeed, as early as January of that year, the Kassel-based Alliance Against Anti-Semitism accused the planned documenta of being influenced by 'anti-Israel activists'. The Alliance included a list of artists participating in the festival which it accused of being long involved in anti-Semitic activities, among them support of the BDS. Two were accused of being associated with the Ramallah-based Kahlil Sakakini Cultural Centre, an organization on the advisory board of the Festival which the Alliance claimed was built on anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic commitments.

The complaints attained national attention when one of the national newspapers of record, *Der Zeit*, published an essay by columnist Thomas E. Schmidt asking, 'Does Documenta have an anti-Semitism problem?' The aim of the column was clearly incendiary, saying that a major scandal was now inevitable and presented the first major challenge for the new

culture minister, Claudia Roth. Schmidt cited approvingly the Bundestag's suppression of the BDS movement but argued that while the political side of the state had made its position clear, the cultural side had not. 'The question can no longer be concealed,' the essay began, the question being, in Schmidt's analysis, a choice between 'freedom of expression' and 'Germany's responsibility toward Israel'.⁶

This was not, of course, an attractive or (in the eyes of many) an inevitable choice, and the next several months saw a flurry of debates on the subject in a wide variety of German news and cultural outlets. Elka Buhr, editor-in-chief of the German art magazine *Metropol*, noted multiple errors in the Alliance charges and dismissed the Schmidt op-ed as 'poorly researched'. She pleaded for a more considered and informed debate: 'One can criticize the "Documenta Fifteen" in many ways', she admitted, 'but one thing is clear':

It makes no sense to drag this exhibition project into the depths of the local BDS debate, which has long since assumed the character of a culture war against the 'identitarian left'. It applies to every international exhibition project: as soon as you invite artists with connections to the Arab World or the Global South, you will meet people who have a different attitude towards BDS than the official guidelines of German politics envisage.⁷

Other voices, especially in the international art world, similarly called for restraint, and documenta attempted to provide a kind of release valve by organizing a series of public talks on the controversy, including informed voices committed to different positions. Scarcely had this series been announced, however, when it became itself a new source of controversy. Joseph Schuster, President of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, sent an open letter to the Minister of Culture denouncing the documenta proposal and claiming that the Central Council had not been consulted about the panels, which were 'oriented towards anti-Semitism' and included discussion of the Palestinian situation which, Schuster asserted, had no connection with anti-Semitism and should be excluded from the programme.⁸ This attack by the leading Jewish organization in Germany was followed by others and, equally importantly, by

the withdrawal from the proposed panels of a number of participants. These were naturally among those most sympathetic to Schuster's position, and their departure strengthened the charge that anti-Semitic forces were controlling the programme.

Under these circumstances, the directors of the festival announced at the beginning of May that the 'free and open discussion' sought by the panels had become 'impossible', and that the panels would not take place. In a lengthy statement they again denied any anti-Semitic bias and any connection with or support of the BDS movement, and they protested 'bad-faith attempts to delegitimize artists and preventively censor them on the basis of their ethnic heritage and presumed political positions'. The announcement of cancellation concluded that 'documenta fifteen has now decided to await the official opening of the exhibition in order to meet the need for discussion as it arises, on the basis of the works shown and statements made at the exhibit'.⁹ In an accompanying press release, the festival expressed regret that the panels had proved 'unrealizable at the current time', but that the festival would 'speak for itself'.¹⁰

Unfortunately, when the festival events began to speak for themselves, the situation became far worse. One of the first major works to be unveiled at the opening of the festival could almost have been designed to further inflame the tensions already existing. This was a monumental political mural from the Indonesian group Taring Padi called *People's Justice*, symbolically depicting the turbulent history of Indonesia in the later twentieth century. The 26-foot-high canvas dominated the Friedrichsplatz, a central square in Kassel, directly facing the main exhibition hall, surely the most public of the documenta venues, and would doubtless have raised protests even in a less tense atmosphere. In part, this mural pictured a *Guernica*-like representation of Sukarno's genocide of leftists in 1965. The Israeli intelligence operation Mossad worked closely with Sukarno, and has been widely suspected of helping to organize the genocide. This relationship was reflected in the mural by such figures as a Mossad soldier with a pig's head and a Star of David scarf encouraging

the Indonesian killers, along with equally stereotyped Nazi figures.

Word about, and images of, these figures spread rapidly, and caused even Germany's cultural minister Claudia Roth to call for the removal of the work. Two days later, the canvas was covered with a black fabric, which Taring Padi, still refusing to acknowledge any anti-Semitic elements in the work, claimed converted it into a 'monument of mourning for the impossibility of dialogue at this moment'.¹¹ This compromise was a complete failure, and the next day Sabine Schormann, the Director of documenta, issued a public apology for 'not recognizing' the anti-Semitism in the mural (clearly suggesting she had not actually seen it). It was removed that evening, but the controversy continued over how the work (and other controversial works) were selected and whether anti-Semitism was widespread in this process.

A few artists withdrew from the festival in protest against artistic interference, and rumours of a wave of censorship swept the artistic community. Schormann tried to balance these contesting forces, organizing a series of public discussions and a major panel on 'Anti-Semitism in the Arts', but pressure on her to resign kept growing. On 12 July, she issued a public statement defending her actions during and since the festival,¹² but this did little to mollify her critics on the Festival Board or in the government, and, four days later, Schormann submitted her resignation.

The rising tensions over anti-Semitism in the arts, and the increasing pressure on the German government at both local and national level to become involved, were observed with growing alarm in the German theatre community, especially after the 2019 parliamentary entrance into the debates. And, as already noted above, over fifty German cultural leaders issued a statement in December 2020 that condemned both the BDS policy of boycotting cultural events and the Bundestag resolution. So far, however, the German theatre world itself had been spared anything resembling the tensions in the art world revealed by the documenta events, but the concerns expressed by the December 2020 statement were soon revealed to be not misplaced.

In the spring of 2022, the second biennial European Drama Award, the largest in Europe, was awarded to the British dramatist Caryl Churchill. That November, however, the jury withdrew the prize, citing as the reasons Churchill's known support of the BDS movement and her play *Seven Jewish Children*, which, according to the jury, 'can have an anti-Semitic effect'. The jury further noted that these activities were not known to them when the prize was awarded – a claim difficult to credit. It is important to realize that this jury was not composed of political functionaries, but included some of the leading figures in German theatre, among them Barbara Engelhardt, Artistic Director of the Strasbourg Theater Maillon; Peter Kümmel, theatre critic of *Der Zeit*; and Thomas Ostermeier, Director of the Berlin Schaubühne.

The prize was officially awarded by the Schauspiel Stuttgart,¹³ and predictable reactions and counter-reactions appeared in British and German publications. On 17 November, an open letter sponsored by Artists for Palestine UK was published in England, signed by over 170 leading British theatre artists, saying that the cancellation reflected a 'deep-seated anti-Palestinian racism' on the part of many German institutions, and calling the cancellation 'modern-day McCarthyism'. Among the signatories were Harriet Walter, Stephen Daldry, Juliet Stevenson, Stephen Frears, Richard Eyre, Peter Kosminsky, and Dominic Cooke.¹⁴ Typical of the counter-reactions was that of Stephen Pollard in the *Jewish Chronicle*, whose message was summed up in its headline: 'Caryl Churchill's Awards Cancellation is Something to Celebrate'.¹⁵ Meanwhile the German jury stood by its decision, but did offer a statement noting that it was 'aware that estimations in Great Britain and Germany differ (and must differ) on this subject'.¹⁶

Given the controversy over *Seven Jewish Children* in Britain and elsewhere, it is difficult to imagine any German theatre staging it – a form of self-censorship – but the actual shutting down of a scheduled production was not far off, and attracted even more attention and debate in the German press than did the Churchill controversy. The work in question

now was the play *All the Birds*, by Lebanese-Canadian playwright Wajdi Mouawad, who, coincidentally, had been the first recipient, two years before, of the European Drama Award, the same prize that would be awarded to and then withdrawn from Churchill. No such concerns had so far arisen about Mouawad, unquestionably the most widely produced contemporary dramatist in Germany.

Mouawad first gained international attention with his play *Scorched*, which was produced by forty-eight companies in Germany, the most anywhere. This was the second play in a non-sequential trilogy involving characters of Middle Eastern origin seeking to uncover family secrets involving the ongoing conflicts in that region. In 2016 Mouawad left Canada to become director of one of France's leading national theatres, the Théâtre de la Colline in Paris. There, in November 2017, he premiered his latest play, *All the Birds*. Although the characters were new, the play returned to his previous concerns: the history and secrets of families caught up in the tensions of the contemporary Middle East. The play begins in New York, where two college students, Eitan (of Jewish descent) and Wahida (of Palestinian), meet in the New York Public Library and fall in love, sure that their family backgrounds will not be a barrier. They are of course mistaken and, as they meet family members and travel to a war-torn Israel, they discover the divisions between them are far deeper than they realized. The play ends on a note of muted hope, of a reconciliation and harmony that may someday be achieved, but is still far off.

All the Birds was an instant and unqualified success, and won France's highest theatre award, the Grand Prix de la Critique. After a run of over a hundred nights in Paris, the production began touring, primarily in Europe, but also to the Cameri Theatre in Tel Aviv, Israel, a co-sponsor of the work. Despite its challenging subject matter, it aroused no protest until August 2019, when it was announced as part of an upcoming festival in La Bâtie, Switzerland. Then an open letter from the BDS collective in Geneva to Mouawad complained of announcements for the

production regularly omitting references to its close connections to Israel, thus concealing its potential political bias. BDS was particularly concerned with the support the production had received, but sometimes chose not to acknowledge, from the Israeli Embassy in France and especially the Cameri Theatre. Peter Brook, the letter noted, had boycotted the Cameri for its support of Israeli military actions on the West Bank.¹⁷ Interestingly, the protest was not about the content of the play, but the fact that it was partially sponsored by major Israeli cultural institutions.

These complaints, especially considering the widespread German opposition to the BDS, unsurprisingly had little if any effect on the continuing success of *All the Birds* in Germany. The Stuttgart Schauspielhaus was the first German theatre to present *All the Birds*, in 2018, and also, as has been noted, named Mouawad the first recipient of the European Drama Award in 2020. During the following years, Mouawad's play became the most often produced contemporary drama in Germany. Then, most surprisingly, it aroused a controversy which reinforced the cultural divisions also seen in the documenta and Churchill affairs.

On 8 October 2022, Mouawad's play opened at the Metropol Theatre in Munich. Although, by this time, it had been produced for almost two years in theatres across Germany and aroused no protest (except, ironically, the charge in 2019 by the BDS accusing the work of being biased towards Israel), in Munich two Jewish youth organizations – the Jewish Student Union of Germany and the Association of Jewish Students in Bavaria – denounced the play as anti-Semitic. As evidence, they quoted comments from various characters in the play expressing familiar tropes of racism, sexism, and self-serving distortion of recent history, all being familiar enough in contemporary discourse, but it was assumed that any speech uttered in a play could be taken as representing the thought of the author – hardly an assumption that anyone with a knowledge of theatre would find acceptable.

In an open letter to the director Jochen Schlöch, the two Jewish youth organizations

charged that the production, at a private theatre (yet one that received state funding), was in violation of the parliamentary ban on providing funding for anti-Semitic expression. Schlöch stopped the performances, and, having learned very little from the documenta affair, felt that he could resolve the problem by organizing a round of talks by interested parties who could discuss the matter in a dispassionate way. Hardly surprisingly, this plan had to be cancelled (as did the one at documenta) when possible participants could not agree on the arrangements or who should be invited.

As the arguments continued, director Schlöch remained determined to present the piece. Finally, in March 2023, he announced a run of twelve performances, accompanied by several public panel discussions on the controversy, which the theatre itself would organize. Then a new obstacle arose. Schlöch received notice from the Simard Agence Artistique, the Canadian company controlling the rights to *All the Birds*, that, due to the exceptional situation in Munich, any cuts or changes to the official German translation, even the most minor, would be prohibited. This, the notice explained, was intended to help ensure that the play was 'not further damaged by unjustified accusations of anti-Semitism and a heated debate in Munich'.¹⁸

To those outside the theatre world, this may not seem unreasonable, but anyone in the profession knows that virtually any professionally produced play will include cuts and changes to the original text, especially if the play is an unusually long one, as is *All the Birds*. Indeed, German theatre directors regularly deal far more freely with dramatic texts than their Anglo-Saxon counterparts. Although this is impossible to check, I would suggest with some confidence that not a single production of the play among the hundreds already given in Germany would meet this requirement. Furthermore, the official German text, like the French one, calls for actors who can perform not only in German, but also in English, Arabic, and Hebrew. Many German theatres, lacking actors with this ability, presented the entire text in German, as Schlöch was planning to do, but which was

now forbidden him. Not surprisingly, Schlöch had to announce that his theatre was incapable of meeting these conditions and gave up the project. Debate over whether this constituted censorship, and if so, who was responsible, continues still.

A variety of would-be mediators from the arts and the political spheres have attempted during the past several years to find a way of dealing with this ongoing and seemingly intractable network involving not only anti-Semitism – a continuing real phenomenon in Germany – but also censorship, artistic freedom, and freedom of speech in general, as well as national cultural policy, racism, threats, and intimidation. Countless public debates and panels have been held, but, at the time of writing, the problem remains a continuing source of conflict in contemporary German society. This situation is all the more troubling because the German theatre is on the whole much more consciously reflective of its surrounding society and its political and social tensions than the Anglo-Saxon one, and much more looked to as a barometer of these tensions. In addition, the fact that the historical relationship between Germany and the Jewish people is a deeply troubled one guarantees that the sort of cultural turbulence that these recent clashes reflects is virtually certain to be a distinctive feature of that nation's cultural landscape for some time to come.

Notes and References

1. Different sources use upper- and lower-case Ds for 'documenta', but the current official spelling is with a small D (except when opening a sentence), reportedly deriving from the lower-case form of 'bauhaus' usage. The present essay will follow that practice, while respecting the original usage in direct quotes.

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