

BOOK REVIEW

Competing Germanies: Nazi, Antifascist, and Jewish Theater in German Argentina, 1933–1965. By Robert Kelz. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2019. Pp. 355. Paper \$25.95. ISBN 978-1501739866.

Robert Kelz’s book enlightens our understanding about German émigré culture and politics, Q2 related to the seismographic political shifts and catastrophes of the twentieth century, and how they played out in the world of the theater. Covering a period from the rise of National Socialism to the immediate post-World War II era, the monograph examines German theater(s) and cultural identity of German communities between left and right political spectrums in Argentina. Jewish and political émigrés and other victims of the Nazi regime arrived in the country in great numbers and settled in urban areas, above all in the capital, Buenos Aires. Politically outspoken, impoverished, and traumatized, they brought a different dynamic to what was hitherto a conservative, religiously minded German community.

Two competing venues were founded in the following years. The Free German Stage (FGS) catered to antifascist, Jewish, and Zionist groups, while the German Theater appealed predominantly to nationalist German crowds and Hitler supporters. Kelz analyzes the playhouses in a close-knit network of print media, political parties, cultural organizations, and educational institutions. For this endeavor, he conducted interviews, consulted programs, newspaper articles, and private correspondence in Argentine, Austrian, and German archives and private collections. The numerous reception analyses of plays grant insight into a wide range of aesthetic tastes and political views, and reveal whether audiences found plays to contain “correct” interpretations of current and historical events and/or represented immigrants’ daily problems and experiences in a truthful or entertaining manner. Unraveling dramas on and off the stage and touching on personal and collective traumas, this study draws a lively and dynamic panorama of German-Argentine immigrant culture.

Competing Germanies starts with an overview of German immigration into Argentina from the end of the nineteenth century to the end of World War II, followed by a review of exile studies scholarship related to South America. Kelz articulates his rather fascinating thesis that “through the shared spectacle of dramatic performance, audiences and ensembles alike negotiated lines that defined their identities, such as victims and oppressors, emigrants and immigrants, conformists and dissidents, as well as Jews, Germans, or Argentines” (18).

The next four chapters explore the theaters’ alliances, strategies, and audiences up to the end of World War II. Chapter 1 introduces Argentina’s changing political landscape from Q3 1933 to 1945, including the country’s immigration policies and ties with Nazi Germany. German media outlets, schools, and other organizations sponsored and supported the FGS and the German Theater, together establishing the social, cultural, and educational infrastructure of the German communities. Chapter 2 follows the biographies of Ludwig Ney, founder of the German Theater, and Paul Walter Jacob, who established the FGS. As theater directors, they largely determined the political and aesthetic trajectory of the

respective venues. The experiences of Jacob and FGS actors Jacques Arndt and Ernst Wurmser, who all arrived in South America as refugees, were shared by many fellow FGS cast and audience members. Q4

The two chapters which follow present the key results of this study. In Chapter 3, Kelz examines economic, political, and aesthetic strategies of the FGS. Here unfolds the picture of a stage that, operating with limited resources, nevertheless managed to organize a program that appealed to audiences across the different social and political factions. Light-hearted comedies (*Charley's Tante*) and plays that combined Jewish questions and antifascist themes (*The Five Frankfurters*, *The Unvanquished*) were the most successful productions, because they contained characters that spectators of all political camps could identify with, made them laugh and/or cry. But conflicts and infighting could not be avoided altogether. Tensions with the Zionists, for example, eventually brought about Jacob ending his cooperation with Zionist organizations. Chapter 4 reveals that from its inception, the German Theater fostered allegiance to National Socialist ideology. The stage was financed by the local Labor Front and Strength through Joy chapters, which gave the German Theater time, space, and means to offer polished productions at affordable prices. Special events such as open-air performances and tours to rural German communities drew thousands of spectators who—like FGS audiences—rather enjoyed comedies. Staging revisionist versions of classics such as *Faust* and *Götz* which nourished exoticized visions of the German homeland and putting maximum effort into correct enunciation and articulation of the German language, the German Theater eagerly followed Nazi drama theory. Q5 Q6

Chapter 5 examines the two theaters' strategies in the immediate post-World War II era. The political tables had turned, and new alliances had to be formed. Where before Nazi cultural politics steered much of German culture in Argentina via the German Theater, West Germany marketed a democratic national identity in partnership with the FGS. Jacob's house aimed to suture ideological rifts between emigrant groups and invited West German film and theater stars for guest performances. The German Theater was without government sponsors and had to reinvent itself. Ney enlisted William Shakespeare's works to promote intercultural integration, while National Socialist drama elements still informed most performances. With former cast members of the FGS working in Argentine theater, television, and cinema, or establishing smaller ventures and workshops, émigré theater eventually merged with Argentine media, culture, and society. The epilogue revisits the most important concepts and research questions of this study.

By offering insight into the workings of German immigrant theater in Argentina, *Competing Germanies* adds a much-needed cultural dimension and revives discourses over German-Argentine relations before and after 1945. The interdisciplinary and transnational nature of this text will be most useful to scholars working in history, Jewish culture and society, arts and/in exile, and theater and performance studies, and will establish a point of departure for related research projects in these and other areas.

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