

MEGAMUSICALS, MEMORY, AND HAUNTED
AUDIENCES: *THE PRODUCERS* IN BERLIN'S
ADMIRALSPALAST

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1. INTRODUCTION

In May 2009, Mel Brooks's musical adaptation of his 1968 feature film *The Producers* was performed for two months at the Berlin Admiralspalast. Having had its German language premiere eight months earlier at the Ronacher Theater in Vienna, the performance of the stage musical *The Producers* in Berlin generated a plethora of articles in the national as well as international press, all of which were concerned with the question of whether Germany was "ready to laugh at Hitler"¹. National (i.e. *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*) and British broadsheets in particular (i.e. *Daily Telegraph*)² as well as political magazines (i.e. *Der Spiegel*, *Focus*), which very rarely review examples of such popular culture as the so-called megamusical, joined British-Library bloggers (Gresser, 2009), e-bay sellers, and the local Berlin press in reviewing not only the opening night but using this theatrical event, arguably, as a justification for lengthy assessments of the current state of Germany's *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. The term literally translates into "dealing with one's past", and has a discursive quality in German, implying both critical examination and reappraisal. It is also an umbrella term under which one can find collective cultural, artistic, political, and social attitudes to and perspectives on Germany's National-Socialist past. The reception of Mel Brooks's musical in Berlin rarely if at all

¹ For use of the phrase "ready to laugh at Hitler" see the following review articles in newspapers ranging from the *Guardian* to the *Berliner Morgenpost*: "Berlin Ovation as *The Producers* Comes to Theatre Loved by Hitler" (Connolly, 2009); "It's Springtime for Hitler" (Crossland, 2009); "Berlin Admiralspalast zeigt Mel Brooks' Nazi-Musical" (Kirschner, 2008); "Admiralspalast provoziert mit Brezel-Fähne" (Anon., 2009).

² The coverage of Germany in the British press, both tabloid and broadsheet, reveals the troubled post-war relationship between Germany and the United Kingdom. The Second World War features strongly in British popular culture, especially comedy, where the German who cannot find humour in his/her country's National-Socialist past is an instantly recognizable stock character.

focused on the quality of the musical itself; instead, its reception concentrated on an assessment of Germany's relationship with its National-Socialist past.

Considering the specificity of the response to the German performance of the stage musical *The Producers*, first premiered in New York in 2001, this article offers a discussion of the commercial musical as well as recent representations of Germany's past in other media of popular culture such as cinema and television, in order to contextualize the reception of the performance at the Admiralspalast. The article asks further whether the reception of *The Producers* in Germany can best be understood in terms of collective cultural memory (Ertl, 2005) which necessarily modifies interpretative strategies (Fish, 1980) of a global community according to a local collective context.

The reception of *The Producers* in Germany is not only an exception to normal theatre reviewing practices: the musical itself is also an exception to normal adaptation practice³, in itself a form of reception. The author of the source text is also the author of the multiple adapted texts: Mel Brooks adapted his own feature film *The Producers* (1968) into a stage musical *The Producers* (2001) and a film musical *The Producers* (2005), turning the title into a global brand in the process. The relationship between so-called original and adaptation is problematized here in as much as the author of the 1968 film cannot be divorced from the adaptation of the stage and film musical, which re-locates the phenomenon that is *The Producers* from 1960s American counter-culture into the realm of a popular, hegemonic entertainment industry. *The Producers* as global brand is confirmed by the poster used for the German production: rather than referring to the poster design used for the Broadway performance in 2001, the marketing campaign for the German performance makes reference to the 2005 musical film. The temporal relationship of the three texts —feature film, stage musical, and film musical— is diffused and notions of original and source challenged. Such differences in marketing campaigns, which further establish the longevity of a brand in contrast to the ephemeral nature of live performance, are noteworthy as *The Producers* is a prime example of the so-called megamusical: aimed at a global audience, it avoids national, regional, and indeed local variation in both its production and its reception.

³ To what extent there is such a thing as a normal adaptation practice is, of course, debatable. What is considered normal in this context is that the majority of adapted texts are created by somebody other than the creator or author of the source text.

2. THE MEGAMUSICAL

The megamusical, a term first coined by Jonathan Burston (1998) as an international musical genre, is a relatively recent phenomenon⁴. As the popular megamusical is designed and created in order to be reproducible in an international context, ignoring any locally grounded performance practices in the process, any variation in terms of reception may offer insights into the relationship between the global and local extra-textual contexts, which have the capacity to determine, or rather shape, meaning. The megamusical as an exponent of commodity theatre undermines, according to Rebellato (2006), regional particularity. Instead of engaging creatively with specificities of local performance context and place or site, “McTheatre often shows a profound disregard, even contempt, for space and particularity” (Rebellato, 2006: 103).

Such commodity theatre is received primarily in two opposing and mutually exclusive ways: on the one hand, as a prime example of popular, global, and capitalist entertainment, this theatre as commodity ignites local resistance either in the form of creative practice or indeed scholarship (see, for example, Rebellato, 2006; Wiles, 2003). Valid as such forms of scholarly resistance are, they are in danger of ignoring the relationship the megamusical has with its audience and, as a result, become elitist in their analysis and criticism of such a theatrical and cultural phenomenon⁵. On the other hand, it attracts unprecedented audience numbers and receives positive, even celebratory, reviews by a regional, national, and international press. According to Herbert Blau and Marvin Carlson, amongst others, one of the “universals of performance [...] is its ghostliness, its sense of return” (Carlson, 2006: 1) and the sensation that “*we are seeing what we saw before*” (Blau, 1987: 173, original emphasis) while at the same time engendering “continual adjustment and modification as the memory is recalled in new circumstances and contexts” (Carlson, 2006: 1). The megamusical makes “ghostliness” and “sense of return” its prime characteristic: presenting an identical experience, undisturbed and unmodified by local specifics, is the *raison d’être* of the megamusical, yet modification and adjustment of memory in performance and reception are denied.

⁴ For more detailed discussion of the megamusical as genre see Wickstrom, 1999; Prece & Everett, 2002; Rebellato, 2006; Russell, 2007. Symonds and Rebellato (2009) offer an overview of contemporary scholarship on the musical as a performance genre.

⁵ See Hobson (1980) for a groundbreaking if somewhat polemical discussion of popular culture and its audience.

Just like the global theme park, the megamusical has become an essential part of the tourist industry whereby the short city break is more often than not structured and advertised around the attendance of such a theatrical event. This is just as much the case for visits to New York City and London as it is for Hamburg, the musical capital of Germany. In the German context, the *Kaffeefahrt*⁶ has, arguably, been eclipsed in popularity only by the musical and hotel package. As Marvin Carlson observes:

Theories of tourism have often noted that physical locations [...] can by the operations of fame be so deeply implanted in the consciousness of a culture that individuals in that culture, actually encountering them for the first time, inevitably find that experience haunted by the cultural construction of these [...] places. (Carlson, 2006: 135)

Carlson argues that such a haunted experience plays a pivotal role in the relationship between theatre building, or site of performance, and the reception of the performance event. The global fame of megamusicals is similarly implanted in the consciousness of a global culture and the initial experience of, for example, Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Starlight Express* is haunted by its cultural construction to the same extent that a first experience of the Eiffel Tower or the Manhattan skyline is. Whether an audience member experiences the performance in New York, London, Madrid or Hamburg, their individual interaction with and reception of the performance will not only be "primarily based upon their previous experience with similar activities or objects, that is upon memory" (Carlson, 2006: 5), but also on the cultural construction of the megamusical as part of a global collective memory.

According to Alex Symons (2008), Mel Brooks's stage adaptation *The Producers* demonstrates not only the regrettable globalization and commercialization of theatre, especially Broadway, but also a shift in adaptation practices whereby the motivation is no longer an artistic one, but a purely commercial one. Symons argues that only the feature film *The Producers* (1968) can be regarded as a "comedy of cultural worth that requires its audience to reconsider social and political pretensions" (Symons, 2008: 143) whereas the stage musical *The Producers* (2001) and the subsequent film musical *The Producers* (2005) are examples of a "universally appealing 'family event'" (2008: 139). Not surprisingly, such a "temporally induced deradicalizing shift" (Hutcheon, 2006: 148) happens frequently in "adaptations within the same

⁶ *Kaffeefahrt* is a cheap day trip by coach organized around a mid-afternoon sales event during which participants are served coffee and cake.

culture” as well as in transcultural contexts (Hutcheon, 2006: 148)⁷. In the case of *The Producers*, the fan of the 1968 counter-cultural feature film can only but see both the 2001 and 2005 deradicalized adaptations as betrayals of the source text’s political integrity. Such a sense of betrayal is even more acute in this particular fan community, as the figure of the author cannot be separated from the figure of the adaptor. Apparently, the brand, consisting of the three texts entitled *The Producers*, has lost the source text’s seeming ability to challenge collective reception and instead perpetuates the global mainstream (see, for example, Brantley, 2001; Mendelsohn, 2001; Symons, 2008).

3. (COLLECTIVE) RECEPTION AND (COLLECTIVE) MEMORY

To what extent a text itself can indeed challenge reception has, of course, long been subject of debate in reception studies and reader-response theory⁸. Arguably, all reception is an interpretative activity which is either engendered by the text and the “horizon of expectation” of the reader (Jauss, 1982), the reader as a member of an (institutionalized) “interpretative community” (Fish, 1980), or the reader and his or her “rhetorical practices” (Mailloux, 1998). The text alone cannot and does not generate and prescribe meaning. Texts can be received collectively because a specific group of readers shares interpretative strategies, which are shaped, not only by institutional, but also cultural and social contexts and the subsequent expectations with which a reader/audience approaches, or rather writes, a text. Astrid Erll’s notion of the collective memory and subsequent collective reception of texts is noteworthy here (2005): not only do texts, once received collectively, become part of collective memory, they also offer a perspective upon and circulate, or even perpetuate, collective memory and a sense of return.

Within performance studies, Marvin Carlson (1990) has argued convincingly that it is not necessarily the text only but its changing context which plays an important role in the “re-making of meaning” (Fortier, 2002: 139). Furthermore, in *The Haunted Stage* (Carlson, 2006), he foregrounds memory in the reception process:

The reception group that Stanley Fish has called “interpretative community” might in fact be described as a community in which there is significant overlap

⁷ See Hutcheon (2006: 146-148) for a number of domestic as well as transcultural examples of such a deradicalization process.

⁸ For a more detailed outline of this argument see Machor & Goldstein (2001). For a summary of reception studies specific to performance studies see Fortier (2002).

of such memory and the reception process itself might be characterized as the selective application of memory to experience. (Carlson, 2006: 5)

While Carlson discusses experience in relation to dramatic texts, performers' bodies, productions, and sites of performance without paying attention to the global phenomenon that is the megamusical, the Berlin performance of *The Producers* elucidates further the agency local collective memory has in the meaning-making process and subsequent reception of the theatrical event.

Arguably, *The Producers* in Berlin challenged the mainstream in that its local reception was markedly different from its global one. The event triggered modification and adjustment of collective memory and it contributed to public debate, specific to its local context. Of course, the performance itself conformed to musical and staging conventions and is certainly not an example of alternative performance practice. Reviewing the musical, *SpiegelOnline* seems to agree with Symons (2008): "Brooks's film, which represented a massive provocation when it was released in 1969 [*sic*], has without question reached the blandest part of the mainstream" (Wahl, 2009b). Similarly, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* concludes its review of the production by stating: "There is no substance to it whatsoever [...]" (Büning, 2009, my translation) while for Lutz Pehnert at the Berlin-Brandenburg Broadcasting Corporation, *The Producers* is no longer provocative but chic (Pehnert, 2009, my translation). The *Berliner Morgenpost*, generally very positive about the production, emphasizes its debt to Broadway convention and tradition and describes the show as an "encyclopaedia of American stereotypes of Germans and National Socialists" (Stölzl, 2009, my translation). Importantly, such value judgements, which are at the core of the contemporary theatre review, are not necessarily the focus of any of the reviews of *The Producers* in Berlin, whether positive or negative. The national and international reception of *The Producers* in Berlin seems to suggest that the choice of city, venue, and subsequent modified promotional campaign, rather than the musical itself, are noteworthy.

4. MEMORIES OF TROUBLED PLACES

The venue for *The Producers*, the Admiralspalast on Friedrichstrasse, is in itself a contentious site⁹. One of the very few theatres to have survived the bombing of Berlin towards the end of the Second World War, it was opened in 1911 as a leisure complex, which included a theatre, ice rink, steam bath,

⁹Friedrichstrasse is located in the centre of Berlin and was one of the city's busiest streets during the Weimar Republic. During the post-war period, it was the location for one of the most famous border crossings between East Germany and West Germany: Checkpoint Charlie.

cinema, as well as a café and restaurant. From 1923 onwards, the theatre specialized in operetta and, following Hitler's rise to power in 1933, became one of his favourite venues: 1941 saw a refurbished Admiralspalast, equipped with the legendary Führer's Box. The declaration by the National Socialists of total war in 1944 led to the closure of all theatres in Germany including the Admiralspalast which re-opened as the home of the Deutsche Staatsoper (German State Opera) as early as 1945. It remained a theatre in East Berlin throughout the existence of the German Democratic Republic, only to close in 1997. The theatre re-opened in 2006 with a performance of Brecht's *Dreigroschenoper*. The Führer's Box, if somewhat smaller than the original, is still part of the auditorium¹⁰.

The programme accompanying the performance in Berlin in 2009 emphasizes its past by superimposing the figure of Hitler onto an image of the current auditorium. In addition to the usual information on cast members, it includes a reproduction of a photograph of the dimly-lit and empty auditorium on a double-page spread. A cut-out figure of Hitler stands in the foreground of the auditorium, at once as if he were watching a performance as well as addressing an audience. The eeriness and ghostliness of this cut-out figure are emphasized by its white border, setting it apart from the photograph itself and alluding to a dynamic, ghostly aura. Commenting upon the exhibition of memorabilia and ephemera of past performances in theatre buildings, Carlson argues,

the public spaces of these great national houses [...] still are today visually haunted by these evocations of their cultural tradition, and the audiences that move (often on repeated occasions) through this field of cultural memory into the performance space itself inescapably adds [*sic*] that general cultural memory to its specific and individual memories of theatrical experiences in these mnemonically highly charged surroundings. (Carlson, 2006: 147)

In the case of *The Producers* in Berlin, such evocations are not a display of pride in a cultural tradition. On the contrary, the presentation of the performance event itself in form of the programme, as well as other marketing material as we will see below, does not allow an audience to evoke only a collective memory of their previous experience of a similar event—the performance of a musical—nor is the Berlin audience able to seek refuge in the global construction of the megamusical. The display of the ghost of the Admiralspalast in form of a superimposed, ghostly Hitler, localizes the context of a global performance,

¹⁰ For a more detailed history of the Admiralspalast see Lehne, 2006; <www.admiralspalast.de/historie.aspx>

and the local site invites a critical site-specific reception of an un-site-specific production.

Not surprisingly, the history of the venue is mentioned in the majority of reviews of *The Producers*: *Der Spiegel* offers a comprehensive summary (Crossland, 2009) and emphasizes particularly the existence of the Führer's Box; so does the *Guardian* (Connolly, 2009), the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (Büning, 2009), the *Daily Telegraph* (Waters, 2009), *The Times* (Boyes, 2009), as well as *Time* in conjunction with the US Cable News Network CNN (Boston, 2009). This is by no means an exhaustive list, yet such an initial scan of newspaper archives demonstrates the extent to which the cultural and political context shapes and even determines the collective meaning making of the theatrical event, despite the megamusical's reliance on a denial of such specific contexts.

The *Berliner Morgenpost* (Anon., 2009; Jänichen, 2009) relies upon local knowledge of the theatre and its location to articulate first impressions of the global marketing strategy employed for the theatrical commodity *The Producers*; a strategy which relies exclusively on a combination of National-Socialist, golden age of musical, and camp iconography, and it is, arguably, the tension amongst the three which is responsible for some of the humour. As the representation of the swastika in Germany is defined as unconstitutional and thus illegal, the symbol of German National-Socialism has been replaced by a pretzel in all marketing and advertising material. The swastika does, however, appear on stage, and in a conscious alteration of the international marketing concept, red banners are attached to the outside of the Admiralspalast. These rectangular red banners, nearly as tall as the building and displaying a black pretzel on a white circular background, are an unmistakable reference to the Third Reich's fusion of pageantry and architecture, and led to some complaints by the public. While a potential member of the theatre audience will contextualize the banners in terms of the theatrical event, for a member of the public, a passer-by who experiences the public space rather than the theatre event, such contextualization is unfeasible. The elements of the marketing campaign specific to Berlin dilute the borders between the performance event and the experience, memory, and cultural construct that is Berlin in general and Friedrichstrasse in particular. Such a tension between the reception of the city and the reception of the performance event is partly responsible for a subversion, or indeed shaping, of a global commodity such as the megamusical. As a result, a global cultural event is made to contribute to a local public debate within a haunted nation, or rather, a local public debate shapes the global cultural event:

There is an overwhelming tendency both in academic and political literature, and other forms of discourse, and in political practice to imagine the local as a product of the global. [...] Place, in other words, is figured inevitably as the *victim* of globalisation. [...] In a relational understanding [...] local places are not simply always the victims of the global; nor are they always politically defensible redoubts *against* the global. They are “agents” in globalisation. (Massey, 2005: 102)

5. THIRD-REICH ENTERTAINMENT AS (COLLECTIVE) CONTEXT

The local debate surrounding the performance of *The Producers* in Berlin attracted the attention of the British press in particular. In response to the national reception, attitudes displayed by British broadsheets—and even more noticeably tabloids such as the *Daily Mail*—towards Germany and its apparent lack of humour in relation to its National-Socialist past changed. Even though an article in the *Daily Mail* mocks German accents by using the headline “Ve Have Vays of Making You Laugh!”, it concludes “they [the producers of *The Producers*] have shown the world that the old ‘don’t mention the war’ gags are now obsolete” (Hardman, 2009). Within a national context, the production in Berlin and, particularly, its reception, is most probably not a milestone, but rather symptomatic of a different phase of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* in post-unification Germany. The performance of *The Producers* in Berlin in 2009 has to be seen in the context of similar reappraisals and critical evaluations of Germany’s past within popular culture. *The Producers* in Berlin was accompanied by two Hollywood adaptations: *Valkyrie* (2008), which retells the attempted assassination of Adolf Hitler by the German resistance movement and most notably Claus von Stauffenberg (played by Tom Cruise), and *Defiance* (2008), a war film using the Polish-Jewish resistance movement known as the Bielski Partisans as its backdrop and starring Daniel Craig, the current James Bond. As *Der Spiegel* poignantly puts it: *The Producers* “clearly fits perfectly into the current wave of mainstream Third Reich-themed entertainment as the light-hearted counterpart to Hollywood productions such as *Valkyrie* or *Defiance*, with their one-dimensional resistance heroes and tired clichés” (Wahl, 2009b).

In addition to such mainstream, popular versions of German history told through hegemonic cinematic conventions, the German entertainment industry has recently begun to add to these popular Hollywood versions of German history. Examples of such contributions are the feature film *Downfall* (2004); the television series *Stromberg* (2004), Germany’s version of the British *The Office*; and Dani Levy’s *Mein Führer – Die wirklichste wahre Wahrheit über Hitler* (2007). Furthermore, symptomatic of a different phase

of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* in post-unification Germany is the appearance of more immediate German history in popular culture, such as *The Lives of Others* (2006) and *Baader-Meinhoff Komplex* (2008). Such examples of contemporary popular culture are steps toward an exorcism of ghosts from Germany's haunted past.

6. CONCLUSION: THE MEGAMUSICAL AS GLOCAL THEATRE

Despite *The Producers* status as a megamusical, the German performance was not necessarily a critical nor commercial success nor an entirely commercial enterprise. A German version of the musical was first performed at the Ronacher Theater in Vienna, 30 June 2008. With a legal obligation to perform the production for an entire year, the Ronacher arranged a transfer to Berlin's Admiralspalast once it became clear the production was not received well by Viennese audiences¹¹. Even though some reviews commented that “the changes of scene and costume provided more variety than the dance sequences” (Wahl, 2009b), in the Admiralspalast the musical took on a poignancy which may not have been intended and certainly counteracts the megamusical's refusal to engage with local specificities of place and site.

Rather than feeling a sense of nostalgia for the 1968 feature film and all it stands for with regard to 1960s American counter-culture (see Symons, 2008), the German audience's collective reception relates to its own collective memory and sense of guilt. The magazine *Focus*, in response to *The Producers* in Vienna, re-phrases a well-known German proverb: “Wer den Schaden verursacht hat, braucht für den Spott nicht zu sorgen” (Dolak, 2008). The emphasis of the original proverb on the victim —“who has been damaged doesn't have to provide the mockery” or rather “the laugh is always on the loser”— has been changed to the perpetrator: “who has caused the damage doesn't have to provide the mockery”, or rather “as you make your bed so you must lie in it”. Considering Germany's sense of inherited guilt and collective memory of a National-Socialist past, the specific collective reception of *The Producers* in Berlin, and Vienna for that matter, has been quite predictable.

The interesting issue, however, lies with the relationship between the megamusical, apparently unable and unwilling to engage with the specificities of the local, and such collective reception which involves a more multifaceted meaning making than the reception of the original Broadway show would suggest. The local is not necessarily always suppressed by the global; the local and the global are not binaries, but rather place and space are relational

¹¹ Disappointing ticket sales are blamed on the global economic crisis or on an apparently deep-seated Austrian conservatism (Wahl, 2009a).

constructions (see Massey, 2005). The megamusical itself, which avoids local variation, may not have been designed to engage with such specificities of local context and site; rather, it exports and perpetuates conservative values within the popular form that is the musical. Yet, specific collective reception can challenge such refusal to engage and inscribe local meaning. Specific collective cultural memory can modify hegemonic global interpretative strategies and the simultaneity of the global and the local can generate or at least contribute to public debate such as *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. Just as “the local is implicated in the production of the global” (Massey, 2005: 102), the global is implicated in the production of the local; “the local and the global are commingling in [...] ‘glocal’ modes” (Featherstone *et alii*, 1995: 101) and the megamusical as glocal theatre is no exception.

The Producers did not stay very long in Berlin. It opened on 15 May 2009 and closed on 19 July 2009¹². It has joined the many ghosts, both theatrical and historical ones, in the nation, the city, and the theatre, and will forever contribute to an audience’s sense of return.

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¹² For comparison, *The Producers* ran at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, London, from 9 November 2004 until 6 January 2007.

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