Trude Hesterberg

* 2 May 1892 in Berlin, Deutschland
† 31 August 1967 in München, Deutschland

Actress, cabaret director, soubrette, diseuse, operetta singer, chanson singer

„Kleinkunst ist subtile Miniaturarbeit. Da wirkt entweder alles oder nichts. Und dennoch ist sie die unberechenbarste und schwerste aller Künste. Die genaue Wirkung eines Chansons ist nicht und unter gar keinen Umständen vorauszusagen, sie hängt ganz und gar vom Publikum ab.“ (Hesterberg. Was ich noch sagen wollte..., S. 113)

„Cabaret is subtle work in miniature. Either everything works or nothing does. And it is nonetheless the most unpredictable and difficult of the arts. The precise effect of a chanson is not foreseeable under any circumstances; it depends utterly on the audience."

(Hesterberg. Was ich noch sagen wollte..., S. 113)

Profile

Along with Rosa Valetti or Erika Man, Trude Hesterberg was one of the first female cabaret directors to act both on and off stage. She directed the Wilde Bühne (the Wild Stage), which was considered the most important literary-political cabaret of the interwar period beside Max Reinhard's Schall und Rauch (Smoke and Mirrors). In addition to her organizational talent, Trude Hesterberg was characterized by her great versatility: trained as opera and concert singer, she not only made a name for herself as soubrette, but made appearances as an actress in films, as a revue star and chanson singer as well. Her singing style was highly adaptable to each genre.

Cities an countries

Trude Hesterberg’s activities were mainly based in her home city of Berlin, where her career began with the chamber plays of the Deutsche Theater. Her appearances as soubrette included operetta productions and revues at the Admiral Palace (then Ice Palace), the Apollo Theater and the Metropol. She first went on stage as a chanson performer in Max Reinhardt’s Schall und Rauch, before she opened her own cabaret, the Wilde Bühne, in 1921. She was also involved in a number of film productions in Berlin. She performed in longer guest engagements in Cologne (Metropol-Theater 1913), alongside Massary at the Künstlertheater in Munich and in Switzerland in 1923. After the Second World War she worked in Munich as theater and film actress, including as Mrs. Peachum in the production of The Threepenny Opera in the Munich chamber plays.

Biography

Trude Hesterberg was born on 2 May, 1892 in Berlin "way out in the sticks" in Oranienburg (Hesterberg, p. 5). That same year, two events occurred in Berlin that would prove of decisive significance for the life of Gertrude Johanna Dorothea Helen Hesterberg, as she was christened. Firstly, on on 20 August, Max Skladonowsky filmed his brother Emil doing gymnastics on the roof of Schönhauser Allee 148 using a Bioscop camera, his first film recording. Secondly, about a month later, the theater “Unter den Linden” opened at Behrenstr. 55/57, later to become the Metropol-Theater, the leading revue and operetta theater in Berlin. These events foreshadow the two major themes in Trude Hesterberg’s life: theater and film. She performed on the Metropol stage many times and performed as actress in over 70 films (see filmography).

„One day the doorbell rang and fate was on the other side. It arrived in the shape of Aunt Tomaschek. She was of massive proportions, both physically and vocally, as the Tomascheks, distant relatives of ours, were Wagner singers.” (Hesterberg, Was ich noch sagen wollte..., p. 14). In her memoir, Trude Hesterberg gives no hints as to when this decisive event took place. The opera singer recognized young Gertrude’s talent (“The child belongs on stage!”, ibid.) and consequently gave her her first singing lesson without asking for a fee. While the Hesterberg family was not poor, frugality was necessary in their household. The mother, Emilie, who came from a family with many children, managed the money earned by the father who worked as a chemist.

Based on her training, it was not necessarily foreseeable that Trude Hesterberg would later make her debut on an acting stage in Molière’s George Dandin at Max Reinhardt’s Deutsche Theater Berlin in 1912. In addition to the (free) singing lessons from her aunt, she also received instruction at the Stern’schen Conservatory with the contralto Margarethe Brieger-Palm. In her memoir, she describes in detail how she went to these lessons secretly and financed them herself by growing fruit and vegetab-
les, since her father refused to give permission. (Hesterberg, p. 19ff.) Later Trude Hesterberg was accepted to opera school and additionally received scenic instruction from the director of the opera class, Nicolas Rothmühl. Overall, therefore, Trude Hesterberg’s vocal training was solely classical in the disciplines of opera and lieder. Her program was therefore at first geared toward the classical repertoire. For her performance exam on 15 June 1911, which was held by the Stern’schen Conservatory in the Beethoven Hall, she sang, for example, songs by Carl Löwe (Abendlied), Richard Strauss (Freundliche Vision) and Johannes Brahms (Der Schmied). In the scenic performances at the opera school, which took place at what was then the Komischen Oper (Comique Opera), she appeared as Lola in scenes from Cavalleria Rusticana (6 May 1911) and as Mignon on 10 May 1912 (Annual reports of the Stern’schen Conservatory 1910/11 and 1911/12, in the Archive of the Berlin University of the Arts. There are deviations from the information in Hesterberg’s memoir.)

Her debut with the Deutsche Theater was followed first by an engagement in Cologne, presumably due in part to rumors of an affair with her stage partner Alexander Moissi; afterward Hesterberg performed as understudy to the already world-famous soubrette Fritz Massary at the Munich Künstlertheater. With her return to Berlin at the Nollendorfplatz-Theater, Trude Hesterberg gained a permanent foothold, appearing in musical comedies and operettas. As theaters were gradually forced to close as a consequence of the First World War, she accepted her first revue engagement in the Apollo Theater. But here as well, the spotlights soon went out, and Trude Hesterberg went on to sing chansons in cafés in order to earn a living. This brought her into contact with cabaret composers such as Werner Richard Heymann and Rudolf Nelson, the latter of whom recruited her for his little revue in the Nelson Theater at Kurfürstendamm. Finally, in the 1920/21 season, she succeeded in making it to the Metropol-Theater and also performed in Hermann Haller’s extravagantly spectacular revues at Admiralpalast. Unexpected new challenges that went beyond singing and dancing awaited her: “For example, to float down a stairway of large proportions without looking at one’s feet – what a feat! I had learned it at ‘Metropol’ – with an incredibly long train! But that was nothing compared to one of those pompous Haller revues. There you were not only confronted with the steepest, longest stairway reaching from the fly floor nearly to the ramp, but you also had a hoooped skirt with seven trains altogether and a gigantic flower and fruit basket to balance elegantly on your head.

(...) After this, no stairway was too high for me, and no train too long.” (Hesterberg, Was ich noch sagen wollte ..., p. 73)

In addition to her theater engagements, Trude Hesterberg continued to sing chansons in various establishments in Berlin (for example Karussel, Charlott, Kakadu) and performed in cabarets, for example in Max Reinhardt’s second Schull und Rauch. She gradually developed her typical left-literary repertoire of chansons. On 5 September 1921 she opened her own cabaret, the Wilde Bühne in the basement of the Theater des Westens (Theater of the West) on Kantstraße, and thereby became Berlin’s presumably youngest theater director. Important authors such as Kurt Tucholsky, Walter Mehring, Klabund (Alfred Henschke in reality), Marcellus Schiffer, Hans Jahnowitz and Erich Kästner wrote for the Wilde Bühne; actors and literary figures such as Kurt Gerron, Annemarie Hase, Margo Lion, Bertolt Brecht, Joachim Ringelnatz, Wilhelm Bendow, Blandine Ebinger, Paul Graetz and Kate Kühl performed there. The music was composed by Claus Clauberg, Werner Richard Heymann, Friedrich Hollaender and Mischa Spoliansky. Along with Reinhardts’s Schall und Rauch, the Wilde Bühne was the most significant literary-political cabaret of the interwar period. In 1923 the cabaret had to close after a fire, and inflation made it impossible to reopen. Trude Hesterberg once again performed in operettas, musical comedies and revues. In 1921 she appeared on stage in the Große Schauspielhaus as The Merry Widow – one of her most famous roles. In 1931 she sang the part of the Widow Begbick in Brecht/Weill’s The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny. In addition, she performed in Kurt Robitschek’s Kabarett der Komiker. When UFA wanted to make a movie of the novel Professor Unrat in 1929, the poet Heinrich Mann, with whom Trude Hesterberg was having an affair at the time, planned to have her play the role of Lola. But at the wish of the director Josef von Sternberg Marlene Dietrich was engaged instead. The movie made her world famous.

In 1934 Trude Hesterberg ventured to found a new cabaret, the Musenschaukel, (Swing of the Muses) but it only existed for a short time; at that time the political climate was not opportune for literary-critical cabaret. On top of this, Trude Hesterberg was regarded with suspicion in the eyes of the National Socialists because of her earlier relationship with Heinrich Mann (supposedly they had been engaged) as well as because of her roles on stage, for example in Brecht’s pieces. A discussion of Hesterberg’s role in National Socialism arose in 2004, when the
musicologist Fred Prieberg pointed out contradictions in Hesterberg’s biography after 1933. The cabaret expert Volker Kühn then researched in the Federal Archives again and came to the following conclusions: In letters to Hans Hinkel and others, and in a questionnaire in the Federal Archive’s possession, Hesterberg identified herself as a member of the NSDAP, and also as a “supporting member of the Schützstaffel (SS) of the NSDAP”. She cannot be found, however, in the NSDAP membership file (Volker Kühn: Ein Nachsatz zur “Roten Trude” [An Afterward on “Red Trude”]. In Triangel (mdr). 10th February 2005 p. 40f. Collection of Newspaper Clippings in the Mainz Cabaret Archive). After 1945 Hesterberg was brought before the military court in Munich on charges of giving false testimony regarding her earlier NSDAP and SS contacts. But she was acquitted: “Since the actress, who was half Jewish and whose husband was shot by the SS shortly before the end of the war, was able to prove that she was blackmailed at that time by the Gestapo, she was acquitted” (ibid., p. 41). Letters in the Mainz Cabaret Archive which Trude Hesterberg wrote to her niece during the Second World War reveal Hesterberg’s pacifist attitude (see LK/D/37,1 in Mainz Cabaret Archive). It is also telling that she first approached Hinkel after she was denied a guest performance in the operetta “Eine Frau, die weiß, was sie will” (A woman who knows what she wants) in Stuttgart. Apparently Hesterberg was aware that she was in danger because of her earlier contacts to the political left. “Now it also becomes clear why she immediately hung up a picture of Hitler in her cabaret, which made Kästner so furious” (Kühn: In: Triangel, 10 February 2005, p. 41. Collection of Newspaper Clippings in the Mainz Cabaret Archive).

After the Second World War Trude Hesterberg continued with her career in Munich and performed in the chamber plays there. She continued to make movies, also for television, and became the moderator of the youth show “Teenager Party” (Budzinki. Das Kabarett, p. 102). Trude Hesterberg died in Munich on 31 August 1967. Her grave is in the Nordfriedhof. In her will, she founded the “Hesterberg Ring”, a prize for the best German chan-son singer, which was awarded for the first time to Topsy Küppers in 1967.

Appreciation

Trude Hesterberg was the head and the heart of Wilde Bühne, the cabaret she founded, which under her leadership became one of the most significant literary-political cabaret stages in the Weimar Republic. She shaped the cultural life of the Weimar Republic not only with her own performances, but also by championing other artists, some of whom were still undiscovered. Numerous artists who later went on to fame, such as Marcellus Schiffer, Margo Lion or Bertolt Brecht, made their first appearances on her stage. With her voice, Trude Hesterberg herself gave political and artistic clout to the chansons of Tucholsky and Mehring. She decided which songs and texts would be presented on stage. And she determined the artistic line that had to be balanced between criticism, public taste and artistic demands. “Here only the individual expressed himself – or rather herself – for these were explicitly “women cabarets”, in which the men appeared only as malicious philosophers or as clowns (...) (Kiaulehn. Berlin p. 539).

In his book Berlin – Geschichte einer Weltstadt (Berlin – the Story of a Cosmopolitan City), Walter Kiaulehn describes how she also influenced the social role of women in the early Weimar Republic with her cabaret: “In Berlin, the cabaret was where the new Berlin woman was discovered. The transformed young women, who had wit to sell in addition to hips and legs, appeared on Rudolf Nelson and Trude Hesterberg’s stages completely dressed, though not at all in a prude or miserly way. At the turn of the century, only men were allowed to sing the song of Berlin. Now young women sang the new songs.” (Kiaulehn. Berlin. P. 541)

In addition to her cabaret-related accomplishments, Trude Hesterberg was also one of the most well-known singers of the Weimar Republic. Thanks to her classical education, she was considerably more flexible than her other cabaret colleagues, who were trained as actresses or altogether lacking in singing training. She was therefore less confined to a specific style or role type and was able to sing in operettas and revues or in musical theaters. She sang, for example, the part of Hanna Glawari in Léhars Merry Widow over four hundred times.

In 1962 Trude Hesterberg received the “Filmband in Gold” (Golden Filmstrip Award) for her many years of acting in German films; in addition she was honored posthumously with a star in the “Cabaret Walk of Fame” in Mainz.

Reception

At the start of her career, the press perceived Trude Hesterberg as a new face (even outside the feuilletons) on the operetta stage. A picture of the young Trude Hesterberg appears, for example, in the Berliner Illustrirten Zeitung in the year 1916 with the caption: “Caught on came-
ra by our photographer taking a spring walk in Berlin: Gertrud Hesterberg from Monti’s operetta theater” (Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung, XXV. Vol. 13, 26 March 1916). At the beginning of the 1920’s, her cabaret performances contributed to a gradual transformation in the perception of the operetta soubrette: “She found a particular style for her performances, one that felicitously harmonized her character with the demands of cabaret by creating a more fantastic, more glimmering, more – if I may put it this way – electrical manner of soubrette,” writes the cabaret critic Max Hermann-Neisse in a review of the Wilde Bühne (In: “Neue Schaubühne” (The New Stage), Dresden, Issue 3/1922 quoted in Budzinski p. 102). This more versatile and deeper expressive spectrum was described by a critic one year later as follows: “Trude Hesterberg is a painter. …She shades, sketches large contours, blends shadows and now and then sets bright, sharp lights with her hands …a voice which possesses the range of a Hungarian fiddle, from a cello bawdiness to a pizzicati sweetness.” (Film & Brettl 1923, quoted in Deutsches Kabarettarchiv Mainz: http://www.kabarettarchiv.de/KabPDF/Hesterberg.pdf).

Over the following years, her consistency and professionalism were widely acknowledged: What “that Hesterberg” does has quality and one can count on her,” said Herbert Ithering, for example, while referring to her “secure routine” (“Monsieur Trulala” review in Berliner Börsencourier No. 204, 2 Maybe 1925), and Kurt Tucholsky wrote about a visit to Kadeko (Kabarett der Komiker): “it was all bad, except for Hesterberg” (letter to Mary Grold-Tucholsky, Düsseldorf, 25 September 1929). In spite of her versatility, her style remains characterized by the elegant, light tone of an operetta: “There is always something ladylike about Holl’s presentation, something revolutionary about Valetti’s and something soubrette-like about Hesterberg’s,” wrote Alfred Kerr (quoted in Geuel, p. 235f.)

Her cabaret colleagues, Tucholsky, Kästner, etc., also had a high opinion of Trude Hesterberg. Friedrich Hollaender wrote in his memoir: “Trude Hesterberg! She deserves a memorial during her lifetime! (…) She sang, she blared, she whispered the most scathing songs of that time. And they are the most scathing when they are whispered. But who knew that besides her? If there was ever a reincarnation of the extraordinarily gifted Yvette Guilbert – it was her!” “Friedrich Hollaender, Von Kopf bis Fuß (From Head to Toe), Munich 1966, p. 112.

Today films with Trude Hesterberg are occasionally shown on television, and some of her chansons were recorded on CD, but in contrast to other chanson singers from that period, there is no CD that is exclusively dedicated to her work. Even chanson and theater programs that mention her are mostly dedicated to the 1920’s or another overarching topic. Her memoir was published in 1971 and was not printed beyond the first edition. There has been no biography as of yet. Since with a few exceptions (such as the chapter “A Short Film Flash”) Trude Hesterberg’s memoir only covers the period until just about the closure of the Wilde Bühne (1924); extensive information, especially on her work in the postwar period, is lacking.

Repetoire

In addition to political and literary chansons, of which she especially loved Mehring/Meymann’s „Die kleine Stadt“ (The Little City), Trude Hesterberg’s repertoire included operetta roles such as the Merry Widow and numerous songs from musical comedies and revues. She recorded these on gramophone records along with a few hits such as “Chiquita” or “O Dolores” with the Weintraub Syncopators. Numerous cabaret chansons were presumably never recorded so that no acoustic impression remains. A detailed re-working of her repertoire using programs and other documents, still needs to be undertaken (see “Demand for further Research”).

More on Repertoire

Research

- Trude Hesterberg’s documentary collection (includes letters, photographs, press reports, typescripts of chapters of her autobiography, some of which were never published; programs, material on films; radio shows, etc.; texts/notes on songs she sang; audio recordings; material on the cabarets she directed): Stiftung Deutsches Kabarettarchiv e.V. Mainz (http://www.kabarett.de) (Mainz German Cabaret Archives Foundation)
- over 70 hits in the category audio recordings in the Deutsche Rundfunkarchiv (German radio archives) and gramophone records in the category cabaret and operetta (http://www.dra.de, contact: Sul@hr-online.de).
- released gramophone/vinyl and CD recordings in the Deutschen Musikarchiv (German Music Archives) Berlin (http://www.ddb.de/sammlungen/katalo-
Files of the Stern’schen Conservatory:

- Archive of the Universität der Künste Berlin (http://www.udk-berlin.de/index.php) (Berlin University of the Arts)

**Need for Research**

- There is still no biography of Trude Hesterberg; only her autobiography has been published, but without critical commentary.
- Above all, Hesterberg’s work after the Second World War has hardly been researched or described.
- Her repertoire needs to be assembled using programs and other documents.
- Her singing style/technique in comparison with other singers of that time (e.g., Massary and others) would be worth researching.

**Authority control**

Virtual International Authority File (VIAF):
- [http://viaf.org/viaf/30331395](http://viaf.org/viaf/30331395)
Deutsche Nationalbibliothek (GND):
- [http://d-nb.info/gnd/118704257](http://d-nb.info/gnd/118704257)
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