

On Stage in The Provinces – A Review on Willi Forst’s Early Career as A Theatrical Actor

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Abstract

This article explores the early stage career of Viennese-born filmmaker Willi Forst, who would later establish himself as one of the leading figures in German-language cinema. Although Forst’s directorial achievements—particularly his celebrated musicals and Viennese films of the 1930s and 1940s—have been the subject of increasing scholarly attention, his formative years as a theatrical actor have received little systematic study. With only limited references in existing literature, this period following the end of World War I remains largely overlooked. Drawing on contemporary reviews, archival sources, and biographical accounts, the article examines Forst’s theatrical performances during the 1920s and considers how his experience on stage contributed to his later work as both actor and director in cinema. In doing so, it seeks to broaden the understanding of Forst’s artistic trajectory and to highlight the significance of his neglected beginnings for the development of his multifaceted career.

Keywords: Willi Forst, German-language cinema, Viennese film, theatre history, performance studies, interwar culture

Introduction

The present article focuses on the early career as a theatrical actor of Austrian-born film director Willi Forst, who is doubtlessly to be counted among the most prominent names of German-speaking cinema between the 1930s and the early postwar period (Loacker 2003, Bono 2010), his films including some of the greatest successes of the time, ranging from *Maskerade* (1934), widely considered as a masterpiece of the Viennese genre, to the first adaptation for the screen of Guy de Maupassant’s world famous novel *Bel-Ami*, in 1939, followed by the so-called operetta trilogy: *Operette*, *Wiener Blut*, *Wiender Mädeln*, that Forst directed during the war, up to the scandalous *Die Sünderin* (1950), starring Hildegard Knef and Gustav Froehlich, Forst’s first film after the end of World War II.

Before debuting as a film director in 1933 with *Leise flehen meine Lieder*, centered on a fictional episode in the life of Austrian composer Schubert and featuring Hungarian operetta singer and actress Marta Eggert, Forst had already established himself, following the coming of sound, as a star of German cinema, playing in a number of musical comedies directed by a master of the genre, the Hungarian-born Geza von Bolvary, and written by Viennese film author Walter Reisch, who would later pursue his career in Hollywood (Karsten 2003, 2004). What preceded was a decade-long career as an actor in the theater and silent film, where Forst worked under the direction of some of the great names of German theater and cinema, including Max Reinhardt, Gustav Hartung, and Erwin Piscator, and, as regards film, Ewald A. Dupont and Gustav Ucicky. Yet, scarce attention has so far been paid by scholars to Forst's theatrical career during the 1920s, with only a few exceptions (Oberzaucher-Schüller 2003), the most notable one being a well-researched study by Ursula Stamberg (2003) on Forst's engagement during 1924-1925 at the municipal theater in the Czech city of Brno, formerly part of the Hapsburg empire, as Brünn, and still having a German-speaking majority at the time. Aiming at shedding light on a little-investigated facet in the career of a master of German-speaking cinema, this article puts the focus on Forst's initial steps as a theatrical actor, leaving Vienna after World War I to work in a number of theaters in the provinces in the first half of the 1920s before successfully moving to Berlin.

First Steps in the Theater

According to the memoirs that Forst worked on toward the end of his life, yet never completed, Forst apparently discovered the magic of the theater as a child. Recalling a matinee performance that he attended at Vienna's Volksoper at the age of four, Forst (2003, p. 536) noted, "They put on *Sleeping Beauty*. The girl and the play did not impress me. Only the stage enchanted me." In the magazine *Film*, which he published for a time after World War II, Forst (1949) recounted a summer spent as a thirteen-year-old in Bad Gießhübel-Sauerbrunn, the Czech Kyselka, along with future actor André Mattoni: "We were already possessed by the theater devil, appearing wherever we could, on more or less improvised stages." While attending upper school, his father's wish being that he would become an engineer, young Forst felt increasingly attracted to theater and film: "Film already represented for me the magical world of unlimited possibilities, luring me with its irresistible power" (Dachs 1986, p. 8). One of Forst's dearest recollections from that period was the evening when he first entered Vienna's Burgtheater to attend a performance of Schiller's *Die Räuber*. "The impression was so great that I came home and declared, 'I will not become a builder, I will be an actor'" (Forst 2003, p. 538). After that, Forst reportedly started appearing as an extra in the Carltheater and the Opera House (Forst 1963; Dachs 1986, p. 8). "The determination stuck with me," Forst (2003, p. 538) would later recall, "I knew I would become an actor."

In 1919, Forst took an engagement as an actor in Teschen. The city had been part of the Hapsburg monarchy; after World War I, it stood on the Czech-Polish border. There Forst was employed by the Deutsches Theater as “second young lover, with chorus duties,” as he noted in his memoirs. (Forst 2003, p. 539) The engagement marked the beginning of an acting career that would lead Forst, during the early 1920s, to a number of cities once belonging to the Hapsburg empire, that, following World War I, became part of Czechoslovakia. In Teschen and other cities where Forst played at the time, the population consisted largely of German speakers, and after World War I, theaters continued to stage German-language productions. Today, the Deutsches Theater lies in Polish Cieszyn, a result of Teschen’s division in 1920 along the Olza river, which now marked the Polish-Czech border. Since the 1960s, the theater has borne the name of Polish author Adam Mickiewicz. Built in 1909-1910, the theater originally boasted about 1,000 seats. According to the *Deutsches Bühnen-Jahrbuch* (Deutsches 1919, p. 615), the ensemble in the season of 1919-1920 consisted of 50 actors, 29 choristers, and 25 musicians. Among the novelties were the operettas *Der König des Lebens*, *Ein dunkler Ehrenmann*, *Die tolle Komtesse*, *Schwarzwaldmädel*, Max Oberleithner’s opera *Der eiserne Heiland*, and Edgar Wallace’s *The Death Eyes of London*. The season run from October 1, 1919, to April 30, 1920. For Forst, the experience apparently was disappointing: “We hardly ever made it out of the chorus. At most for a sentence or two, like to announce that the horses had been saddled,” he later recounted (Forst 2003, p. 541). “I was considered completely without talent.”

After Teschen, Forst’s career as a theatrical actor continued in Zwittau, the Czech Svitavy, where he was engaged by the Mährisches Städtebundtheater. The city lay in the heart of Czechoslovakia, between Bohemia and Moravia. In the early 1920s, there were about 20,000 residents, including the surrounding area. The Mährisches Städtebundtheater was a minor establishment, its ensemble consisting of 21 actors divided into the specialties of drama and operetta, and the chorus and the orchestra each counting 12 members. In the *Deutsches Bühnen-Jahrbuch* (Deutsches 1920, p. 512), Forst’s name was listed under the operetta performers, with his role as comedian. Occasionally, the Mährisches Städtebundtheater also performed in the city of Mährisch Schönberg, the Czech Šumperk. The season opened with Gerhard Hauptmann’s *Die versunkene Glocke*, new productions included Frank Wedekind’s *Erdegeist*, Bernard Shaw’s *Mrs Warren’s Profession* and Siegfried Trebitsch’s *Frau Gittas Sühne*, as well as various comedies and operettas.

In the subsequent season, the Mährisches Städtebundtheater moved from Zwittau to the cities of Mährisch Schönberg and Znaim, or the Czech Šumperk and Znojmo, in southern Czechoslovakia, not far from the Austrian border. In Mährisch Schönberg, performances took place at the Deutsches Haus, the present Šumperk Theatre. In Znaim, they were hosted in the City Theater (Deutsches 1921, p. 528), which had been built in 1899-1900 from designs by famous architect Alexander Graf, who was also responsible for Vienna’s Volksoper. The theater comprised about 600 seats. In

the season of 1921-1922, the Mährisches Städtebundtheater performed, among others, Hans Müller's drama *Die Flamme*, the farces *Zwangseinquartierung* and *Die Geliebte in Moll*, and a number of operettas: *Der Tanz ins Glück*, *Die blaue Mazur*, *Das Hollandweibchen*, *Die schöne Mama*, *Der letzte Walzer*. Forst (2003, p. 543) would later recall, "I became a sort of lead character actor. That meant I had to play everything." In Znaim, Forst apparently also contributed to the staging of a number of plays (Stanzl 1948, p. 4), with the *Deutsches Bühnen-Jahrbuch* listing him as a "Spielleiter," i.e., a director.

From Mährisch-Schönberg, Forst went to Gablonz, the Czech Jablonec, where, in the season of 1922-1923, he was engaged by the City Theater. Close to the border with Germany and Poland, the city numbered among the major Bohemian centers in the interwar period, being particularly renowned for its jewelry and glass production. His engagement in Gablonz marked a further step in Forst's career, the local City Theater outranking the stages in Zwittau, Mährisch-Schönberg, and Znaim. The imposing building in the Viennese Secession style had been built in 1907 from designs by prominent architects Ferdinand Fellner and Hermann Helmer. It had approximately 900 seats, and in the season of 1922-1923, the ensemble consisted of 43 players. In addition, there were a chorus and an orchestra with 23 and 31 members (Deutsches 1922, p. 219).

Becoming a provincial star

Then Forst moved to Brünn, or the Czech Brno. There he was engaged for the 1923-1924 season by the Vereinigte Deutsche Theater. Brünn was the third-largest city in Czechoslovakia after Prague and Bratislava, and as Stamberg (2003, p. 143) has noted, the Vereinigte Deutsche Theater competed with the bigger theaters of Austria and Germany. Its importance reflected in the size of its ensemble, which consisted of 42 actors, 32 chorus members, and 41 musicians (Deutsches 1923, p. 166-167). Its program comprised performances in the City Theater, which primarily hosted operas, the smaller Deutsches Haus, and the Deutsches Schauspielhaus. In addition, weekly guest performances took place in the City Theater in Olmütz, the Czech Olomouc.

In Brünn, Forst quickly managed to attract attention. The first pieces he appeared in were the operettas *Das verwunschene Schloss*, *Fatinitza*, *Die Bajadere*, and *Der Zigeunerbaron*. Regarding Franz von Suppé's *Fatinitza*, in which Forst played the governor of the Turkish fortress, the press (H.F. 1923a) commented, "Herr Forst's comfortably dry and unforced *Izze Paschat* was not without effect." As for Forst's performance as Conte Carnero in *Der Zigeunerbaron*, it was appreciated that his portrayal of the character was "free of caricature, almost restrainedly dry" (H.F. 1923b). Then, Forst took on the main role of the Jewish onion merchant in Lehár's *Der Rastelbinder*: "It has been a long time since Pfefferkorn seemed so enjoyably homey as he does here, due to Herr Forst's restrained comedy" (H.F. 1923c). The Robert Stolz operetta *Der Tanz ins Glück*, Hugo Hirsch's vaudeville *Der Fürst von*

Pappenheim, and Jean Gilbert's musical comedy *Dorine und der Zufall* followed, with critics particularly praising Forst's portrayal of hat manufacturer Adam Mutzenbecher in *Der Tanz ins Glück*: "A droll caricature of a petty bourgeois, protractedly stylized and preposterously buoyant, with the occasional nod to Wilhelm Busch" (H.F. 1923d).

In early 1924, Forst appeared in Leo Fall's *Madame Pompadour* and *La belle Hélène* by Jacques Offenbach. Here, he portrayed "a touchingly human, overwhelmingly comical, and utmost funny, fatherly Menelaus," the press noted (ch. 1924). In March, Forst played in Emmerich Kalman's operetta *Das Hollandweibchen*, also overseeing choreography for the production of Robert Stolz's *Der Hampelmann*. In April, Forst appeared in Karl Stigler's operetta *Die Ballkönigin* and Robert Winterberg's *Der Günstling der Zarin*. Then he played Dr. Falke in a production of *Die Fledermaus*. Critics considered him "a performer of compelling elegance" (H.F. 1924a). Toward the end of the season, Forst worked as a choreographer again, for Michael Krauss's operetta *Bajazzos Abenteuer*. He also acted in a few plays at the City Theater in Marienbad, the Czech Mariánské Lázně, where he appeared, among others, in the operettas *Der Hampelmann*, *Clo-Clo* and *Das Weib in Purpur* (Cato. 1924a, 1924b).

Forst's cooperation with Brünn's Vereinigte Deutsche Theater continued in the following season (Deutsches 1924, p. 232). Between September and November 1924, Forst participated in the operettas *Der Vogelhändler*, *Orpheus in der Unterwelt*, playing the title role, *Zigeunerliebe* in the part of Russian aristocrat Peter Dragotin, and *Polenblut*. He found great success as the Mikado in Arthur Sullivan's operetta by the same name. Forst also was in charge of the choreography for the premiere of Franz Plischka's operetta *Der Bubikopf* in December 1924, where Forst's performance was celebrated as "a masterful example of sprightly elegance" (F.H. 1924b). Following this, Forst appeared in *Tausend und eine Nacht* and Vada Ennèm's *Die Königin von Montmartre*. At the beginning of 1925, Forst played in Robert Stolz's *Mädi*, followed by the operettas *Die tolle Lola*, *Der Graf von Luxemburg*, *Don Cesar*, *Revanche*, and *Die Geliebte seiner Hoheit*. In spring, he took part in further operettas: *Gräfin Maritza*, *Die blaue Mazur* in the role of Adolar von Sprintz, *Pusztaliebchen* and *Der süße Kavalier*. At the end of May, Forst acted in Brünn for the last time, in *Madame Pompadour*. Looking back at that time, Forst (2003, p. 543) would later write with a touch of nostalgia: "People called it Brünn on the Seine. It was a little Paris. Very arty and completely run-down. [...] A wonderful time. I was the star."

Concluding remarks

Eventually, Forst would make his way to Berlin, where he got engaged for the season of 1925-1926 by the Metropol-Theater (Deutsches 1925, p. 222), one of the temples of entertainment in the German capital in the 1920s, and whose director, Fritz Friedmann-Frederich, according to film journalist Curt Riess (1956, p. 341), took notice of Forst during a performance in Marienbad. The transition from the provinces to the German metropolis marked a pivotal moment in Forst's career.

With a population of approximately four million, Berlin was one of the world's largest cities at the time, after New York and London, becoming, after World War I, alongside Paris, Europe's cultural center. The subsequent years were to be decisive for Forst. "At the time, you could only work and make something of yourself in my field," as Forst (Dachs 1986, p. 13) later recalled, "in Berlin." Looking back at his early days as a theatrical actor in the former provinces of the Austrian-Hungarian empire, Forst (1949) summed up, with a touch of nostalgia: "You had to play everything that came along, operetta and great drama; roles that suited you and roles for which the director did not have anybody else." At the apex of his career, Forst (1949) would write in an article about becoming an actor in the magazine *Film*, "I always regret that the young people in the theatre of today are not, as once we were, granted to stand on the boards in Olmütz or Mährisch-Ostrau or Hintertupfenstetten for years before venturing to make the leap onto the stages in the big cities". The significance that Forst clearly places on the experience calls for a deeper examination of the early career as an actor on stage and in film of one of the masters in the history of German-language cinema, to which this article aims to add a little.

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