English troupes in early modern Germany: the women

Book Chapter

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600 reales towards the erection of a covered theater in the Corral de la Pacheca in Madrid, and he made a similar investment in the Corral de la Príncipe in 1582. From the very beginning, Zan Ganassa appears to have been a great success in the *corrales*: from June 1579 to February 1580 he played two to three times a week in the Corral de la Pacheca, and in 1581–1582 he acted almost daily in the Teatro de la Cruz. As he had in Italy, he performed in a wide range of venues and genres: in Spain, in addition to *corral* performances, he was active both in court, at wedding ceremonies, and in *autos sacramentales* in Seville during Corpus Christi celebrations. Clearly he was linguistically supple in the manner of Tristano Martinelli. A stylized Bergamasco dialect seems to have been his basic stage idiom (in fact he is one of the first *arte* zanni explicitly noted to have spoken Bergamasco), but he could modulate it in the direction of standard Tuscan. According to Bartoli, when Ganassa first arrived in Spain he was not well understood, but was able to mix in Spanish words with his Bergamasco dialect.

Because its theater was much more conditioned by regular Italian comedy than has generally been realized, the *commedia dell’arte* was, along with humanist writers and humanist institutions such as academies, the major vehicle by which the theatergrams of Italian drama were conveyed throughout Europe, to all points of the compass and even extending to a circums-Mediterranean reach. Virtual roads forged by cross-dynamic alliances such as those between the Gonzagas and the Habsburgs were quickly traveled, on horseback or muleback, by international actors such as Giovanni Taburino, Aniello Soldano, Tristano Martinelli, and Zan Ganassa. Actors, such as these, who were particularly flexible both physically (combining acting and acrobatics) and linguistically were the ones who prospered. Exactly what the *commedia* disseminated throughout Europe is difficult to document, because it lacks the clear textual evidence of author-to-author international contact, but it may have been more important for being more diffuse, as Louise George Chubb has argued. It must have been highly inflected physically, conveyed by actors’ bodies before their audiences; it often involved method more than matter, as the evidence of the English “plots” suggest; it was probably frequently conveyed between actors. If, as this volume argues, something like an international “system” of theater can be identified by a comparative perspective, this essay has attempted to demonstrate that the *commedia dell’arte* could certainly function as an international vehicle.

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2 On such women, and female performers at court, see, for example, individual contributions to Pamela Allen Brown and Peter Parolin, eds, *Women Players in England, 1500–1660*, Beyond the All-Male Stage (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005); and Clare McManus, *Women on the Renaissance Stage, Anna of Denmark and Female Masquer in the Stuart Court (1590–1619)* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002).

style of performing, based around comic jigs of the type increasingly marginalized on English stages, continued to enjoy popularity in the German-speaking regions until well into the eighteenth century, but received a heavy setback in 1737. This was when the German playwright Gottsched, aided by the great troupe-leader and travelling actress Caroline Neuber, who had herself learned her trade with English-trained actors and actresses, “banished” Harlequin and the English clowns to the margins of the German stage. Before 1650, British troupes, unlike the Italian and French travelling troupes, did not feature actresses. In pre-1650 Europe, the involvement of women as travelling performers was largely limited to professional Italian and French, but not British, acting and mountebank troupes, amateur Church- and court-sponsored productions, and fairground spectacle. The only women directly involved with British troupes were non-performing spectators and wives. The first “English” actresses arrived only with the post-1650 introduction of actresses onto the stages of the British troupes in Europe. The historical evidence relating to these troupes offers the key to identifying the actresses, and to gaining an understanding of the type of performances they staged themselves and inspired in future generations, and the various categories of non-performing women associated with them. The “English” players, their theatrical practice, repertoire, and not least their actresses, were central to the founding of a genuinely national German stage. The nationalities dominating the professional touring troupes of early modern Europe for over a century were, from around 1560, the Italians, and then, from the 1580s onwards, the British, and to a lesser extent the French. With few exceptions, it was only after 1650 that Dutch, Flemish and German actors founded full-time professional touring troupes independently of British players. Modern drama is characteristically dominated by the written texts of its play scripts. Early modern professional theatre offered the spectator a much wider range of spectacle than that now associated with the word “theatre.” Troupes of travelling players were expected to stage shows which combined acting with music and dancing, as well as clowning, acrobatics and other stage business of a type now largely confined to the circus or sports arena. These non-verbal elements, lacking or inadequately represented in local amateur and Church-sponsored productions, were hugely popular with paying audiences, both in public and at court, and became increasingly crucial to the commercial success of the professionals. Easily the most important non-scripted element of clowning, and the success of individual troupes was often based to a large extent on the popularity of their chief clown, notably the Italian-inspired Harlequin, and the Picklebein of the English actors. The secular German professional theatre always its existence to that brought over the Channel by successive waves of British troupes who toured Germany for a century from the 1580s. German actors trained with the British troupes, assimilating their repertoires and stage skills, and continuing to label themselves as “English comedians” and to base their productions on them until well into the eighteenth century, decades after the last British-born actors had left Germany. The more commercially successful aspects of British professional stage business, and notably the clowning, dominated German professional acting, until German players, led by their “English”-trained actresses, campaigned to banish the foreign-inspired clowns from serious drama.


them, commenting on the skill of both their actors and actresses. British troupes on
the continent had no actresses before the 1650s, and typically used boy actors to play
the younger female roles. This precedes the changeover from boy to female actors in
Britain itself, where it took place immediately following the Restoration re-opening
of the London theatres, in the years 1660–1662. German professional touring
performers did not feature women until the late 1660s, and in Catholic Bavaria,
castrati were routine well into the seventeenth century, and the first professional
German actresses played at court only in 1669.10

In Germany and the Netherlands, some women acted in amateur productions. Vigil
Raber engaged women for a municipally sponsored mystery play he staged with
local amateur actors in the Tirol in 1514, while in 1600, the Dutch rhetorician
Jakob Duym prescribes two fake breasts for a female character in an amateur play:
"unless she is played by a woman." In guild entertainments of 1623 for the visit to
Danzig of Polish King Sigismund III, the butchers toss a boy and a girl on a banquet,
while the girl throws a doll up even higher than herself, and elsewhere two girls
"dance, jump, fence and engage in other comical entertainments together." The girl
was evidently still a child, as the city fathers further note that the Englishwoman "took
a lot of money from our people, by touring up and down the countryside on a little
wagon drawn by a horse, staging his ridiculous performances with the two little short
characters." The Nuremberg archives also record that the rope-dancer Christina
Milenz, a self-styled Bohemian exile who drew large crowds in the first half of July
1628, was unable to compete with the English troupe of Robert Reynolds, which
arrived in the city on 15 July.13

Although the early modern British acting on the continent were exclusively
male, several important types of non-performing women were closely associated
with them. Three such are the actors' wives and other female dependants, their
female spectators, and businesswomen who, independently or in partnership with

11 Brandt and Hogendoorn, German and Dutch Theatre, p. 388; and Johannes Bolte, Das Dramatische Theater im 16. und 17. Jahrhundert (Hamburg and Leipzig: Voss, 1895), p. 53. On
12 Munich, Stadarchiv, Sig Trautmann, 91 VII 53.

15 Frankfurt, Stadarchiv. Ratsupplikationen 1602, fols 265r–266v: (7 September
1602).
17 Johannes Meissner, Die englischen Comedianten zur Zeit Shakespeares in Oesterreich, (Vienna: Konemann, 1884), pp. 76–82.
18 Balthasar Pauungartner and Magdalena Behaim, Briefwechsel Balthasar
September 1592).
Fair, and the comments of threatened locals such as the playwright Bredero and the Augsburg Mastersingers. Mangoldt reserves his most detailed comments for the effect on his female audience of the English troupe’s dancer, traditionally identified as Sackville’s acrobat John Bradstreet. The Frankfurt poet praises the English actor’s cultivated manners, spectacular leaps and skilful dancing, and twice dwells on the tightness of his hose, “deliberately arranged in such a way that one could see that between his legs, upon which lusty vises and maidens were concerned to direct their gaze.”

Mangoldt describes how the eyes of one well-dressed young woman at a window were so single-mindedly glued to the performing Englishman that she seemed completely in his thrall, and how his attention, in turn, was fixed on the jewellery she wore. He concludes that the dancer’s tights, and the crude jokes of Jan and Wursthühnse, the English clowns, are a far greater draw for the audience than any skill in the troupe’s music and acting.

Around 1613, the Dutch playwright Bredero admonishes the local Amsterdam women for deserting his plays in favour of those of the visiting Englishmen: “Most virtuous young ladies! We are puzzled as to why some girls have not come to see our play, despite ... every day quite shamelessly, and with great dedication, pursuing the light-footed foreigners, who appear to be permitted every indiscretion.”

The troupe of the Englishman John Spencer was in Augsburg in 1614, a year specifically singled out by the Guild of Mastersingers in a later attempt to ban English actors from the city in order to prevent them from stealing their best young performers, and debauching the local girls.

In the 1650s, George Jolly’s troupe was also accused of seducing local girls. The Dutch churchman Gisbertus Voetius, writing in 1643, was one of many who warned the women in his flock against going to see the players:

- because they dress up and adorn themselves as if voying with one another, and are taken there by men or youths, coming to watch, but also to be watched themselves.

Information about women travelling with the troupe is elusive, and often equivocal, as official petitions rarely name more than the troupe leader himself and occasionally other actors. Accompanying family, servants and other dependants are only exceptionally alluded to in official documents, as when a troupe leader cites the need to feed a large entourage to strengthen his request for permission to perform.

John Green was one such. A troupe leader who rose through the ranks, starting as a boy actor of female roles, before going on to play the clown and leading a troupe of his own, by 1615 his petitions were citing his need to support a troupe of eighteen. The actors John Bradstreet (married to Katharine Bransen, the Danish personal chambermaid to Herzogin Elisabeth of Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel), Thomas Sackville and Jacob Peadle were accompanied by their wives during their 1597 Frankfurt season. Sackville, the troupe’s leader, successfully petitioned for his wife, Elisabeth Smidts, to be allowed to stay on in Frankfurt as a private lodger, for a month or so, rather than in a public inn, while he was away from Frankfurt. Bradstreet and Peadle were also granted permission for their wives to stay on, with the proviso that they move into a public inn, if their stay exceeds the agreed period. Possibly as early as 1602, Sackville, creator of the famous stage clown Jan Bouset, retired from the stage to concentrate on his business interests as a cloth merchant. These were carried on by Elisabeth Franchen, his second, German, wife, after his death in 1628, but with so little success that she died in debt and poverty in 1641, followed by Sackville’s only surviving child a year later.

While playing with his troupe at the Polish court for several years from 1616, George Vincent made several brief visits to London, importing goods into Warsaw in 1617 and 1618. In 1618, he also brought back five more performers, as well as Harris Jones, the wife of his fellow actor Richard Jones, and his own wife and children. Harris Jones routinely accompanied her husband on the continent, as confirmed by documents of the period 1615–1616, and a letter of 1620 to Edward Alleyn, noting that she is waiting in Danzig to reunite her husband, who is at court, and asking for help in paying her London rent. In 1642, shortly after the death in Warsaw of the English actor whose stage name was Pickelhering (almost certainly George Vincent), his widow was living in Warsaw on a pension from King Vladislau of Poland.

Pregnancy and childbirth were commonly cited reasons for trying to extend playing.

23 Brandt and Hegedoum, German and Dutch Theatre, p. 399.
24 Bolte, Das Danziger Theater, p. 46.
25 Frankfurt, Stadtarchiv, Ratsprotokolle 1597, fol. 39v., 41r., Bürgermeister Bücher 1597, fol. 107r., 110v. (27 and 29 September 1597).
seasons in particular cities, as for example in 1657 by the troupe leader George Jolly, who used the heavily pregnant state of his wife as a reason to plead for an extension to the stay of his acting troupe in Frankfurt.

Neither the presence nor the duties of actors’ wives are revealed in routine archival documents. That the troupe leader John Spencer was accompanied on tours by his wife and children is indicated in an official document of 1615. This record that Spencer was awarded the citizenship, protection and patronage of the city of Cologne, following the conversion to Catholicism of his entire acting troupe and entourage, including himself, his wife and his children.29 A fluke incident of two years earlier reveals that it was the responsibility of Spencer’s wife to collect the entrance money from spectators. It is noted in his petition to the city authorities of Rothenburg in Bavaria, after a particularly sodalic episode at the end of 1613.29 Spencer relates that his heavily pregnant wife was stationed on her own at the door of the New Hall of Rothenburg’s Town Hall, which led to the Old Hall. She was collecting entrance fees to the performance of her husband’s troupe, evidently to be held in the Old Hall, when she was challenged by two soldiers who tried to enter without paying. They forced their way past her, manhandling her to the ground over the chair behind her, and allowing some twenty more customers in the queue to push past without paying, before Spencer’s wife, injured and further handicapped by pregnancy, could get up and summon help. Both soldiers pleaded innocent, but were sentenced to choose between heavy fines, or banishment from the region.

Women also contributed to the business of providing costumes and props for the theatre, sometimes in surprisingly enterprising ways. When, in 1592, Richard Jones was asked by the troupe leader Robert Browne to accompany him “beyond the seas,” his first thought was to ask perhaps the greatest theatrical entrepreneur of Shakespeare’s time, Philip Henslowe, to help him reclaim a suit and cloak he had pawned. Natasha Korda’s research into the pawnbroking activities of Henslowe identifies the probable role in Henslowe’s interrelated lending, pawnbroking and theatrical costume and prop business interests, of women such as his wife Agnes and niece Mary, and his probable employee Goody Watson.30 Henslowe’s clients evidently included travelling players, such as Richard Jones, as well as those working in London.

A document of 1644 in The Hague archives records a payment of 118 guilders by Nathan Speede, to a certain Jane Sibjurch Jones of The Hague, widow of the late “Robbert Reijnals.” Born in 1599, she was the daughter of the actor-manager Robert Browne, and widow of Robert Reynolds, another successful English touring actor, whom she had married by 1615, and whose last recorded tour was in 1649 with William Rowe.31 Jane Reynolds settled in The Hague at the beginning of the 1640s.

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28 Meinsen, Die englischen Comedianten, pp. 37–8; and Traunma, “Deutsche Schauspieler,” p. 305.
29 Rothenburg Stadtarchiv, AA 556/1, fol. 11r–v., 13r–17v.
their child was given as a reason for extending his stay in Nuremberg. This was shortly before he returned to England, although he made occasional visits to the continent as late as the 1670s, when he was in Dresden with a newly formed troupe.26 He led troupes throughout the German-speaking regions in the 1650s, at a time when most other itinerant British troupes had permanently returned to Britain. Jolly's financially disastrous tour of 1651 terminated with the pawning and then loss of most of his troupe's costumes and props. This led to a radical restructuring of the troupe in 1652. In order to strengthen his market appeal in Germany, Jolly kept only a few British players, and replaced his Netherlandish with a much larger contingent of native German-speaking actors. A dated list of 1653 gives the first names of Jolly's actors, including two women. Their names, Ursel and Catrin, indicate non-English origins, and they have been identified as Maria Ursula Cäter and Catharina Faussauer. These women were not just a temporary addition to the troupe as testified by the mention of actresses in several suppositions, such as one to the authorities of Basel. In a playbook of December 9 1654, Jolly, styling himself the "genuine English Pickelhering," offers to delight the citizens of Rothenburg, with "lovely English music and genuine women, after the French fashion."27

In 1655, Jolly joined forces with the most significant early German acting troupe, led by Johann Ernst Hofmann and Peter Schwartz, whose wife Rebecca also acted with Jolly's players. However, he lost his two most talented actresses in or around the year 1657, when friction between Jolly and the Germans led to the troupe splitting up again. Peter and Rebecca Schwartz, and Jolly's protégé Ursula Cäter and Hofmann, now married, set up an independent troupe, although economic constraints persuaded them to join forces with Jolly's troupe for one last time in Frankfurt in 1657.28 The troupe of Hofmann and Schwartz became known as the "Innsbruck comedians" because, from 1660, they were employed by the Innsbruck court, becoming the first longstanding professional German troupe, and the first to be engaged as court players, although they continued to tour. As late as 1669, a playbook for their Rothenburg season still advertises as a novelty the inclusion of "genuine women" on stage.29 Ursula Hofmann, Jolly's pupil, has the distinction of being the first in a long line of accomplished actresses who, with or without their husbands, led German troupes. These women, many of them directly or indirectly trained by


British actors, shaped the course of German theatrical history for over a century from 1660, co-founding and leading the significant dynasties that characterized Germany's early acting troupes. Perhaps the most detailed, keenly observed and vivid surviving insight into the typical performances of the mixed-gender British troupes appears in a literary description occupying three chapters at the heart of a novel, pseudonymously published in 1683 by the professional court musician Johann Beer.30 The first describes the publication of the methods of Theophilactus de Anglia's fictional English troupe, and provides the exact wording, and even layout, of their handbook. The central episode brings into high relief the extreme sexual licence of the typical playhouse and its spectators, with illicit lovers' assignations flourishing in the dark and noise, and involving women of every age and class. They include elegant ladies, respectable wives, students' girlfriends and prostitutes, as well as the female cut-purses and thieves who preyed on the borrowed finery of the women. The final chapter outlines the chaotic progress of the play itself, to its pitiful premature conclusion, providing the exact wording of the fictional dialogue of the actress and two actors. The plot concerns the Turkish emperor's attempted seduction of a recently widowed young maid servant. Each of their short speeches is punctuated with an extemporized addition by the clown, whose utterances are characterized by word play that is as breathtaking in its vulgarity as in its virtuosity. The contrast between his colloquial dialect and the pompous "high German" of the two main characters further heightens the comical effect of the original. The clown cannot bear to see his wife, the actress, on stage by his colleague the actor. His jocular comments become increasingly pointed and aggressive, and finally, when the clown taps him with his slapsick, the actor can take no more, and punches him on the nose. This initiates a fight between the two men, with the newly hired clown taking his wife and leaving the troupe to muddle their way through the rest of the performance without them.

Although subjective, and biased by strong satirical overtones, Beer's account conjures up the German stage in the period which saw the final throes of the struggle between the waning fashion for the "English" players, and the new taste for the French style of acting. It illuminates the contrast between the male-dominated English style, and the growing confidence of the new English-trained, but French-inspired German female stars, and graphically portrays the struggle for centre stage between the clowns and actresses. Beer's account has particular resonances for Jolly's own troupe, in which struggles of this type had repeatedly been played out quite literally. The renowned English troupe-leader was noted for an exceptionally belligerent temperament, and his actresses evidently found him impossible to work with on any kind of long-term basis. In a letter of 1658, Duke Ludwig of the Pfalz had written of his troupe: "Master George the comedian has arrived in our regions, but in a miserable state, because his company has broken up completely, and split into two, even the women have left him ... George's choleric disposition has again split up the
company, and he only has 8 companions with him. In 1660, the political situation allowed Jolly to return to London, where he was granted a Royal Licence to act, to the dismay of Thomas Killigrew and William Davenant, who bought him out, after which Jolly toured the provinces. The extent to which Jolly himself influenced the acceptance of actresses on Restoration London stages is not known.

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41 Alexander, "George Jolly", p. 31.
Transnational Exchange in Early Modern Theater

Edited by

ROBERT HENKE
Washington University – St. Louis, USA

and

ERIC NICHOLSON
Syracuse University in Florence, Italy

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6.1 Nicholas Poussin, *The Rape of the Sabine Women* (ca. 1637), The Louvre, Paris, France. Photo Credit: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY. Image reference ART52689 100


Notes on Contributors

Richard Andrews is Emeritus Professor of Italian at the University of Leeds, UK. He is the author of Scripts and Scenarios: the Performance of Comedy in Renaissance Italy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). He has continued to publish on Italian Renaissance theater and its influences on other cultures, and is currently preparing a translated and commented edition of the commedia dell’arte scenarios of Flaminio Scala.

Christian M. Billing is Lecturer in Drama at the University of Hull. His publications include performance criticism articles for the journals Shakespeare, Shakespeare Bulletin and Didascalia; articles in Early Modern Literary Studies and New Theatre Quarterly; chapters in Refiguring Mimesis (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2005) and The Routledge Companion to Directors’ Shakespeare (London: Routledge, 2008) and his own monograph Masculinity, Corporeality and the English Stage 1580–1635 (Aldershot: Ashgate 2008). A film and theater professional, he has directed numerous productions of early modern playtexts in a variety of public venues. He also teaches and publishes in the area of ancient Greek theater, culture and society.

Robert Henke is Professor of Drama and Comparative Literature at Washington University in St Louis. The recipient of fellowships from the Fulbright Foundation, Villa I Tatti, and the National Endowment for the Humanities, he is the author of Pastoral Transformations: Italian Tragicomedy and Shakespeare’s Late Plays (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 1997) and Performance and Literature in the Commedia dell’Arte (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

M.A. Katritzky is the Wilkes Research Fellow at The Open University, UK. The recipient of fellowships from NIAS, the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation and the Herzog August Library, Katritzky is the author of The Art of Commedia: A Study in the Commedia dell’arte 1550–1620 with Special Reference to the Visual Records (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006) and Women, Medicine and Theatre 1500–1750: Literary Mountebanks and Performing Quacks (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), and guest-editor of “Issues in Review: the commedia dell’arte,” forthcoming with the journal Early Theatre.

Jacques Lezra, Professor of Spanish and Comparative Literature at New York University, specializes in literary theory and in the literary, visual, and philosophical culture of the early modern period. He has taught at the University of Wisconsin at Madison and at Yale, Harvard, and the Bread Loaf School of English. He is the author of several books, including Unspeakable Subjects: The Genealogy of the Event in

Clare McManus is Reader at Roehampton University, London, where she works on early modern theater and women’s theatricality. She is the author of Women on the Renaissance Stage: Anna of Denmark and Female Masquing in the Stuart Court (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), editor of Women and Culture at the Courts of the Stuart Queens (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), and co-editor of Reconciling the Renaissance: A Critical Reader (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). She is currently editing John Fletcher’s Island Princess for Arden Early Modern Drama.

Eric Nicholson is a Lecturer at Syracuse University in Florence, where he teaches courses in classic and early modern theater. A recipient of Fulbright, Javits and Villa I Tatti fellowships, he has published articles in several volumes, including A History of Women in the West, vol. iii (Davis and Farge, eds; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993) and Renaissance Transactions: Ariosto and Tasso (Finucci, ed.; Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999). At Syracuse University in Florence and elsewhere, he has directed over twenty full-scale productions of plays by Shakespeare, Molière, Flaminio Scala, and others.

Shornimighthouse Panja is Professor and Head, Department of English, as well as Dean of the Arts Faculty at the University of Delhi. She is the editor of Many Indians, Many Literatures: New Critical Essays (Delhi: Worldview, 1999) and Critical Theory, Textual Application (Delhi: Worldview, 2001), and co-editor of Signifying the Self: Women and Literature (Delhi: Macmillan, 2004), as well as a forthcoming volume on Shakespeare and class. She has published articles on Renaissance poetry, Shakespearean performance, and Indian literature, and translations of Bengali and French drama into English. Panja is the Secretary of the Shakespeare Society of India.

Mace Perlman is a classically trained actor who studied with Marcel Marceau at his Ecole Internationale de Mimeodrame, as well as at the Piccolo Teatro di Milano, where he acted in Giorgio Strehler’s acclaimed productions of Faust and The Servant of Two Masters. In the US, Mr. Perlman’s acting has taken him from the Pearl Theatre to Hartford Stage, where he has played numerous Shakespearean roles, including Mercutio, Fluellen, Claudius, Antonio in The Merchant of Venice, and the Fool in King Lear. He has taught master classes in commedia dell’arte and performed at Harvard University, The North Carolina School of the Arts, Stanford University, Purchase College SUNY, and the University of Wisconsin Madison.