The Production, Reception and Cultural Transfer of Operetta on Early Sound Film

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In this essay, I investigate the way early sound films of operettas were received in domestic and international markets. I explore the changes that occurred when operettas from the German stage were adapted for British and American films. The meanings that audiences drew from them, and their impact on social and cultural history have been matters of debate. In order to reflect on interpretations that relate only to musical films of the period and not to general questions of adaptation, I am going to begin with a brief look at an example of a German screen operetta; in other words, an operetta composed directly for the screen and not a filmed version of a stage work. I am choosing *Die Drei von der Tankstelle*, which was directed by Wilhelm Thiele and released by Ufa (Universum-Film Aktiengesellschaft) in 1930. My reason for selecting this is because it proved to be Ufa's most popular film of the 1930s. It tells of three bankrupt friends who buy a filling station but, subsequently, fall in love with the same woman motorist. In the end they manage to resolve their differences and remain good friends (one of the film's hit songs was "Ein guter Freund").

Films such as this have given rise to contradictory interpretations. For Siegfried Kracauer operetta films were simply an escapist genre, and one that benefited enormously from the advent of sound. While noting the novelty of its contemporary setting, he calls *Die Drei von der Tankstelle* "a playful daydream" with a "half-rational" plot.[1] I maintain, however, that many films of this kind did not disguise their character as a form of entertainment, and, on occasion, made their artificiality explicit. The end of the film makes an audience very aware that what they are watching is screen entertainment. When an actor refers to the watching audience, as happens here, it alerts that

1 Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler* 207.

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audience to the fact that the audience cannot in reality be seen by that actor. What is more, the two leading actors, Lilian Harvey and Willy Fritsch, express their surprise at seeing that the audience has not gone home, in spite of the fact that the film has ended. Then, they begin to realize that a crucial audience expectation has been denied. The absence of a 'proper operetta finale' has supposedly created confusion, and so an extravagant and overblown conclusion follows that the audience would recognize as a parody of an operetta finale.

Lilian Harvey was English-born but became a great star in Germany for Ufa. It was odd that, despite her acting and dancing skills, she failed to succeed in Hollywood, and was perhaps constrained by constant Ufa promotion as "the sweetest girl in the world."[2] Willy Fritsch first appeared with Harvey in a silent film of Jean Gilbert's *Die keusche Susanne* in 1926, and there were to become a 'dream couple,' as operetta singers Jeanette MacDonald and Nelson Eddy did later in Hollywood. Both couples were admired for their positive on-screen energy and resilience as social and financial problems grew increasingly bleak in the off-screen world.

Most operetta films rejected the present day in favor of what Kracauer described as "lucrative speculation in romantic nostalgia," pointing to Erik Charrell's *Der Kongreß tanzt* of 1931 as a prime example.[3] He sensed in them a deluding fantasy that made the Weimar Republic vulnerable to the rise of Nazism. Richard Dyer countered this view by arguing that they responded to social needs in a time of depression by offering utopian visions.[4] It is an idea picked up more recently by Rainer Rother, who has also emphasized that irony is employed in order to stimulate laughter.[5]

Occasionally, a screen operetta might be the subject of a stage adaptation, the earliest example being the first German screen operetta, Robert Stolz's *Zwei Herzen im Dreiviertel-Takt*, which premiered at the large Ufa-Palast cinema in Berlin on 13 March 1930.[6] This film enjoyed international success. Indeed, Ufa presented the only serious European challenge to Hollywood, and it built its international success by producing operettas and comedies, shooting versions in several languages (German, English, French, and sometimes Italian) to facilitate international distribution. Kracauer, however, condemns *Zwei Herzen im Dreiviertel-Takt* for selling the public "standardized dreams of an

2 Pehla, "Harvey, Lilian" 131; Bock, *The Concise Cinegraph* 186.
3 Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler* 208.
4 Dyer, "Entertainment and Utopia."
5 Rother, "Genreblüte ohnegleichen."
6 Holm, *Im 3/4 Takt durch die Welt* 283.

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idyllic Vienna."[7] This became the first example of a screen operetta transferring successfully to the stage when it was performed in Zurich as *Der verlorene Walzer* in 1933. Transfers were, and continued to be, almost always the other way round. The move from film to stage can have uncertain results. Two later examples are the 1958 film musical *Gigi* (Lerner and Loewe), which had little success on stage in 1973, and, in contrast, the stage adaptation of the 1933 film musical *42nd Street* (Dubin and Warren), which triumphed as a musical on Broadway in 1980.

In Hollywood, English-language versions were made of operettas from the German stage, and these films often prove illuminating regarding the changes that were found necessary to ensure a similar emotional response from audiences raised in differing cultural contexts. There are also lessons to be learned about the ways in which performers needed to respond to the differing demands of film compared to theatre. *The Smiling Lieutenant*, a Hollywood film directed by Ernst Lubitsch and released in 1931, became the first sound-film adaptation of a stage operetta to enjoy international success. It starred Maurice Chevalier as Lieutenant Niki, Claudette Colbert as Franzi, and Miriam Hopkins as Princess Anna. It was based on *Ein Walzertraum* (Vienna, 1907), which had music by Oscar Straus, and a libretto by Leopold Jacobson and Felix Dörmann. Joseph W. Herbert had written the book and lyrics for the Broadway production of 1908, but the film had a screenplay by Ernest Vajda and Samson Raphaelson, and new song lyrics by Clifford Grey. Additional musical arrangements were made to Straus's music by Johnny Green and Conrad Salinger (uncredited), and the uncredited musical director was Adolph Deutsch.

It was normal practice for arrangers to update and re-orchestrate the music and for the libretto to be revised to suit the medium of film. The changes that were made in such adaptations provide insight into the workings of cultural transfer. The Hollywood operetta films helped to shape understandings of European operetta in the USA, and, in order to do so, they found ways to relate the time of their original stage productions to the cultural context of the period in which they were now being released as films.

The plot of *The Smiling Lieutenant* revolves around an incident in which Lieutenant Niki, on street duty in Vienna during the arrival procession of King Adolf XV of Flausenthurm and his daughter, smiles and winks at his sweetheart Franzi. Unfortunately, Princess Anna thinks it was meant for her.

7 Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler* 207–08.

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He finds himself having to marry the Princess and move with her to Flausenthurm. He remains fond of Franzi, but, in the end, Franzi teaches Anna how to win Niki over to herself.

Early in the film there is an illustration of how continental European operetta was transcreated for the American market; in the stage operetta Lieutenant Niki romances Franzi with a song in waltz rhythm "O du Lieber," but in the Hollywood film he sings, instead, a new song in fox-trot rhythm: "Breakfast Time—It Must Be Love!" The following scene begins with a steam train emerging from a tunnel. This is the director Ernst Lubtisch's cheeky suggestiveness, but, interestingly, it is also an effect that is possible only on film and not on the theatre stage. A little later, there is another interpolated song, "Toujours l'Amour in the Army," which had been specially tailored for Maurice Chevalier, the actor playing Niki. A little French vocabulary is included because, of course, the audience knows Chevalier is French—even if he is cast in the role of an Austrian lieutenant (and, besides, he is never able to disguise his French accent).

Later in the film, there is another example of a change that was made to respond to a new cultural context. In the stage operetta, Franzi had to teach the princess about the lively temperament that makes Viennese women so attractive, and encourages her, also, to cater for his love of Viennese food. In Ludwig Berger's 1925 silent film of the operetta, Franzi goes further, and teaches the princess to play a Viennese waltz on the piano. In Lubitsch's film, Franzi has rather different advice: she plays ragtime piano and sings "Jazz up Your Lingerie." Clearly, the vivacious, emancipated American woman is an equivalent of the Viennese woman and her fiery temperament. Yet, while Niki is discovering his wife's change of behavior, the film's underscore is of the trio "Temp'rament" from Act 2 of the Viennese version. So, two qualities, one urban American, the other Viennese, are equated, which tells us that women of differing cultures are able to attract and domesticize men, but not necessarily by using the same means.

The historical period of the film's production is evident in Chevalier's occasional gaze to camera. This is a mode of address linked to what Tom Gunning has termed the "cinema of attractions" in reference to the emphasis on showing and exhibiting in early cinema. It is a feature of early European film that was rejected in classical Hollywood practice because it ran counter to the creation of realistic illusion.[8] At the very end of *The Smiling Lieutenant*, Chevalier

8 Gunning, "The Cinema of Attraction" 64.

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sings blatantly to the camera, emphasizing the performance act and, therefore, breaking with the naturalistic illusion that was soon to be the hallmark of Hollywood practice.

Lubitsch went on to direct *The Merry Widow* with Chevalier and MacDonald in 1934. It was MGM's second film of the operetta, the first being Erich von Stroheim's *Die lustige Witwe* (1925), starring John Gilbert as Danilo and Mae Murray as the widow, which departed considerably from the operetta. This silent film contains what would now be called a 'backstory' of the widow as an ex-vaudeville American girl who arrives in the small kingdom of Monteblanco and later goes to Paris. Lehár's music was re-arranged by William Axt and David Mendoza for a silent cinema orchestra. Lubitsch's film starred Chevalier as Danilo and Jeanette MacDonald as the widow, the screenplay was by Ernest Vajda and Samson Raphaelson, and new lyrics were provided by Lorenz Hart (with some additional lyrics by Gus Kahn). The musical arrangement was by Herbert Stothart, with help from orchestrators Paul Marquardt, Charles Maxwell, and Leonid Raab. Herbert Stothart, who had enjoyed plenty of Broadway experience, was a composer, arranger, and musical director for MGM in the 1930s. Discovering that her forthcoming marriage to Danilo had been a plot to obtain her wealth, the widow calls it off, and Danilo returns to Marshova, where he is imprisoned for failing in his task. She goes there too, to vouch for his innocence, and they are finally reconciled in his prison cell.

There are several differences between the stage operetta and the film version: in the former, it is money that creates distrust for a couple in love; in the film, seduction scenes are important. Lubitsch has a characteristic fascination about seduction and power relations, the latter being different during the seduction process when sexual desire is the focus.[9] Maurice Chevalier is the same charming seducer he was in *The Smiling Lieutenant*. Surprisingly, *The Merry Widow* was not a box office success and that prompted MGM to find a new partner for MacDonald in the shape of Nelson Eddy.[10]

The British film *Blossom Time* of 1934 was a screen operetta based on Schubert melodies arranged by G.H. Clutsam and differed from his earlier West End success *Lilac Time*, which had been a reworking of Heinrich Berté's *Das Dreimäderlhaus*. The director Paul Stein was Viennese but had worked for five years in Hollywood.[11] The cast included Richard Tauber, one of the first op-

9 Vincent, "'Lippen schweigen, 's flüstern Geigen'" 272–74.
10 Henderson, *Red, Hot & Blue* 124.
11 Ames, *A Critical History of the British Cinema* 85.

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eretta singers to become a sound-film star. An examination of the scene in which Tauber accompanies himself on piano singing "Once There Lived a Lady Fair"—the music of which is by Clutsam rather than Schubert—reveals that his mimetic and gestural signs are in accord with operatic performance practice (as is his wide dynamic range) and contrast with the naturalistic code adopted by the members of the drawing-room audience in the film: his gestures are theatrical, whereas theirs are restrained.[12] The success of *Blossom Time* persuaded Alfred Hitchcock to try his hand later that year with the operetta *Waltzes from Vienna*, which Oswald Stoll had presented at his Alhambra Theatre in 1931–32.

The next year a British film titled *I Give My Heart* (1935) gave viewers an opportunity to see and hear the Hungarian coloratura soprano Gitta Alpár, who had been the star of the related stage version, *Die Dubarry*, four years earlier in Berlin. Operetta films like to feature a hit song during the opening credits, and this film not only begins with a hit song from *Die Dubarry* but also takes its title from that song. The film is an English version of Theo Mackeben's musical reworking of Millöcker's *Gräfin Dubarry* of 1879, which had been provided with a new libretto by Paul Knepler, Ignaz Michael Welleminsky, and E. M. Cremer.[13] The film version was created by Frank Launder, Roger Burford, Paul Perez, and Kurt Siodmak, but the lyrics by Desmond Carter and Rowland Leigh for the English stage production of 1932 were retained. The arrangement of the music for the film was by Theo Mackeben. No doubt because of its French theme, British International Pictures (BIP) engaged a French director, Marcel Varnel. However, Gitta Alpár, in the role of French milliner Jeanne, speaks her English lines with a Hungarian rather than French accent. Alpár had left Germany with her daughter for England before she made this film. Her husband, the film star Gustav Fröhlich, divorced her because she was Jewish and he wanted to remain in favor with the Nazi Party. Disappointingly, *I Give My Heart* made little money at the box office and Alpár's film career was short-lived. She became a singing teacher and died in Los Angeles in 1991.

The momentum for operetta films in the UK continued. In 1937, courtesy of British Unity Pictures, came *The Girl in the Taxi* (1937), directed by André Berthomieu. It was based on the 1912 English stage version by Frederick Fenn and Arthur Wimperis of the 1910 operetta *Die keusche Susanne* (music by Jean Gilbert and a libretto by Georg Okonowski). For the film, a screenplay was

12 Scott, "Song Performance in the Early Sound Shorts" 190–94.

13 Its earlier libretto was by F. Zell [Camillo Walzel] and Richard Genée.

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devised by Austin Melford, after a screen story by Fritz Gottfurcht, and Frank Eyton wrote some additional lyrics. The British film industry now had the confidence to look beyond the German stage for its lead singer and chose Frances Day. She was actually American but had made her home as a cabaret artist in England in the 1920s and, by the time of this film, had become a popular West End star. British Unity Pictures, having taken care to hire a French director, also made a simultaneous French version of *The Girl in the Taxi* as *La Chaste Susanne*, the title by which the operetta was known in France. The only member of the cast to play in both versions was Henry Garat (as René), a Paris-born actor who had earlier taken the role of Tsar Alexander I in the English and French versions of Erik Charell's *Der Kongress tanzt* (1931).

The American version of *Walzer aus Wien* was staged on Broadway in 1934 and renamed *The Great Waltz*. It had a revised book by Moss Hart but retained many of the lyrics Desmond Carter had written for the West End production. In 1938, it became an MGM movie, directed by Julien Duvivier. It starred Louise Rainer, Fernand Gravet (as Johann Strauss Jr), and coloratura soprano Miliza Korjus. Moss Hart's book was replaced with a screenplay by Samuel Hoffenstein and Walter Reisch (with uncredited help from Joseph L. Mankiewicz and Vicki Baum). Lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II replaced those of Desmond Carter. The musical arranger and composer of additional music was Dimitri Tiomkin, who later became celebrated for his scores to Hollywood Westerns, especially *High Noon* (1952).

The film begins with on-screen announcement:

> "In Vienna in 1844 'nice people' neither danced the waltz … nor kissed their wives in public … nor listened to new ideas …
> In 1845 came Johann Strauss II and his immortal melodies …"

It is unhistorical nonsense, of course, but an excuse follows: "We have dramatized the spirit rather than the facts of his life, because it is his spirit that has lived—in his music." There follows a scene of Strauss's first performance with his orchestra at Dommayer's Casino. It is poorly attended and going badly. An aristocrat enters with a 'famous opera singer' Carla Donner in his party, and she is immediately attracted to young Strauss. Around twenty minutes into the film, there is a dramatic cut from the sensual abandon of the waltz to a decorous minuet in an aristocratic hall. Carla has invited Strauss, who has brought a new song. Carla sings it, tactfully avoiding announcing that it is a waltz. The polite audience looks a little shocked as the waltz rhythm kicks

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in, but—predictably—they are soon won over. Evidently, none of these people had ever listened to the music of Strauss's father or that of Joseph Lanner during the past ten years, even though the latter had been music director for court balls at the Hofburg Imperial Palace until his death in 1843.

During a scene in the Wienerwald, sounds of the environment (such as birdsong) give Strauss the inspiration for his waltz "Tales from Vienna Woods." He even benefits from Carla's assistance. The mixing of music and sounds of the environment is hard to realize on stage, but it can be achieved easily and effectively in the medium of sound film. In particular, film allows a familiar melody to emerge from the diegetic sounds of the scene, as happens here. Hitchcock had used the same kind of sonic technique when he included a scene in which a dough-making machine inspires the "Blue Danube" waltz in *Waltzes from Vienna*. Strauss and Carla's carriage ride is indebted to Erik Charell's pioneering example in *Der Kongress tanzt*, when Lilian Harvey as Christel travels to see Tsar Alexander I (Willy Fritsch). In that film, unlike *The Great Waltz*, it is not a stationary carriage with a background film that creates the illusion of motion. The camera shows an onlooker touching the moving carriage, as well as Lilian Harvey reaching up to touch one of a bunch of balloons held by a bystander, and women at the flower shop throwing flowers into the carriage.

Tracking shots produce a sense of space and motion that is difficult to recreate on stage, unless some sort of screen projection onto the backcloth is employed as an alternative. However, a tracking shot, which requires a camera dolly on rails, is costly for filmmakers. Therefore, a decision may be taken on economic grounds to film a couple sitting in a carriage against a screen showing scenery that has been filmed previously by a camera operator riding on the back of a vehicle of similar size to that in which the couple sit. That will give the impression of the vehicle's being in motion (induced movement), but it allows no interaction with the surroundings since those are merely screen images. Use of tracking shots, or simulated tracking shots is common when a stage scene involving a mode of transport is transferred to the screen. A later example occurs in the 1955 film version of Rodgers and Hammerstein's 1943 Broadway musical *Oklahoma!* during the song "The Surrey with the Fringe on Top." In the song the ride in the Surrey—a four-wheeled carriage—is seen in a cutaway scene as the characters imagine their ride.

Later in *The Great Waltz*, there is a domestic scene with Strauss playing the tune of the bullfinch duet from *Der Zigeunerbaron* on the piano and becoming irritated with his wife Poldi for disrupting his work. They decide to leave Vi-

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enna, and they inform a gathering of their friends. Strauss then sings "One Day When We Were Young" to the bullfinch tune. This furnishes an example of how music could be updated to the meet the musical expectations of the 1930s in contrast to those of the 1880s. The original was constructed in verse and refrain form, the typical popular song structure of the later nineteenth century, but the later version was converted into the typical Tin Pan Alley 32-bar song structure AABA. To achieve that, the verse music is scrapped, and the 16-bar refrain becomes the basis of the entire song. It is stated and repeated, then a new melodic passage is added for the B section before section A is repeated again.

Carla happens to look in on the farewell gathering, and her look indicates that she knows she is the inspiration for Strauss's new song. She has come with an operatic commission, and Poldi persuades Strauss that he must stay in order to compose for the Imperial Theatre. Not only did a performance of a Strauss operetta in the Imperial Theatre never take place, but the piece he writes now is *Die Fledermaus*, which was actually composed many years before *Der Zigeunerbaron*. Poldi goes to the performance and tells Carla in emotional tones that she is not standing in her way, because she loves Strauss deeply and recognizes his manly needs as an artistic genius. Strauss leaves in a carriage with Carla, but she is suddenly struck with the realization that Poldi will always be between them. She tells him so and catches the Danube boat to Budapest alone. In the film's closing scene, it is forty-three years later, and Strauss, accompanied by Poldi, has an audience with the Emperor, who escorts him to his balcony to show him a cheering crowd of grateful, cheering Viennese citizens who adore his music.

When a stage operetta became a film, the change from the stage play to screenplay was affected by the scenario, shooting script, and use of montage, and that led to blurred distinctions about authorship between the screen writer and the film director from the 1920s on. The operetta film containing the most far-reaching changes is MGM's *The Chocolate Soldier* (1941), directed by Roy Del Ruth and starring Nelson Eddy and Risë Stevens. When Rudolf Bernauer and Leopold Jacobson adapted Bernard Shaw's play *Arms and the Man* (1894) as a German libretto in 1908, he had given consent. A year later, he had grudgingly permitted performances of the stage operetta on Broadway, then London, in an English version by Stanislaus Stange, provided the program announced that it was an unauthorized use of his play. However, he was no longer willing to allow his play to be used for a new film version in English and demanded a hefty fee from MGM.

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MGM was not prepared to pay any royalties to Shaw, and so Leonard Lee and Keith Winter were commissioned to devise a screenplay based on *The Guardsman* (*A testőr*, 1910), a play by Ferenc Molnár that had already been made into a film by MGM in 1931. Naturally, MGM retained the score by Oscar Straus, which went through some modification in the hands of the musical directors and arrangers Herbert Stothart and Bronislau Kaper, and the orchestrator Murray Cutter (uncredited).

In addition to a changed plot in which a jealous husband flirts with his wife while disguised as a Russian guardsman, there are two interpolated operatic numbers: Camille Saint-Säens's "Mon Coeur s'ouvre á ta voix" from *Samson et Dalila* (1877) and "O du mein holder Abendstern" from Richard Wagner's *Tannhäuser* (1845). Another interpolated number was Mussorgsky's "Song of the Flea," and there was also some additional music by Bronislau Kaper with lyrics by Gus Kahn. The number of reprises of the song "My Hero" in the film make up for Straus's failure to provide a single one in the stage operetta—he had not expected it to be the huge hit it became.

Concluding Remarks

Austrian film director Arthur Maria Rabenalt commented on the various advantages screen adaptations possessed over the stage originals: the libretto became the basis of a scenario with montage, complicated intrigues could be edited in a way that made them more credible, awkward scene changes could be effected quickly, and characters could be made more convincing by rendering certain dramatic situations more visible.[14] Another means of removing stage rigidity in screen adaptations was to reduce the quantity of music and be flexible about the sequence of an operetta's musical numbers. Musical numbers can often seem static and undramatic on film, so the tendency was to increase the amount of dialogue. However, short instrumental reprises could be used for scene transitions, and new numbers could be specially composed for the film version.

Rabenalt insists that operetta scenes filmed outside of the studio provided the viewer with more than a travel brochure and the beauty of landscape. Its naturalistic effect was really decisive for the success of the new genre both at

14 Rabenalt, *Der Operetten-Bildband* 33.

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home and abroad. The stage operetta, he maintains, was always pseudorealistic in its apparent naturalism and rather artistic in its decorative offer of illusion by means of stylistic stage extensions.[15]

In many cases, screen adaptations of operettas were far from being filmed versions of the stage production: the music would be reworked, updated and re-arranged, and new music, or the music of other operettas, might be included. In addition to all this, it was necessary to facilitate the border crossing of operettas by including features which an audience in another country could recognize and empathize with, and to ensure that any unfamiliar historical context was explained. As such, they offer examples of the way cultural meanings adapt to different media contexts at different times.

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15 Ibid. 39.

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