

Berlin and its Theatres between 1870 and 1890¹

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We start with a look at a chart (fig. 1) showing the change in the number of theaters in Berlin from the 1850s to the 1930s. Two periods of significant increase can be seen from the end of the 1860s up to the early 1870s and from the end of the 1890s up to 1910. As the first of these periods represents the greatest expansion, this one will, however, take “center stage”.

Although far more theaters did spring up during the first period of growth, only theaters that remained for more than one year following approval by the authorities are included here. This chart (fig. 2) shows the actual number of theaters approved, based on data from the Berlin Commercial Inspectorate (Gewerbepolizei). For the years 1869 and 1870, as many as 71 theater approvals are on record. According to Kunitake Kume's *True Account of the Ambassador Extraordinary & Plenipotentiary's Journey of Observation Through the United States of America and Europe*, the members of the so-called “Iwakura Mission” visited Berlin in 1873 and were quite surprised to find its citizens eating and drinking even during performances. This was something they never observed either in the theaters of New York, London, Paris, London or in any other theaters they visited during their month-long journey with the aim of studying political, social, economic and technological structures, hoping to gain insights that would be helpful in modernizing Japan and bringing it on par with western countries.

This sudden increase of theaters was caused by the “right of unrestricted commerce” (Gewerbefreiheit) introduced in 1869. The revised “Article 32” of the “Act on Theater Approval” states that “To open a theatrical business requires approval. Unless there are serious considerations concerning the liability of

¹ The text is based on the third chapter of my book “Berlin & Tokyo – Theater und Hauptstadt” (Itoda 2008: 89-129). I would like to thank the publisher iudicium for their permission to use excerpts of it.

the applicant any application must be granted. Restricting theater performances to a certain genre is not permitted.”² Prior to the introduction of the new right to unrestricted commerce it was up to the authorities to decide if there was demand for new commercial enterprises or not which allowed them to both limit the number of theaters and to specify theater locations at will. Now theaters could be opened with no regard to demand. The restriction on performing “tragedy, opera and ballet,” a privilege that only the court theater had been granted up to then, was abandoned in the same act, together with restrictions concerning the nearest distance a new theater was allowed to be built around the court theater, in order not to become a competitor to its business. The same document shows that as many as 22 applications for opening a new theater had been denied between 1866 and 1868, amounting to 10 in 1867 alone. One can see that applications had considerably increased even before the revision of “Article 32” of the “Act on Theater Approval.”

In *True Account of the Ambassador Extraordinary & Plenipotentiary’s Journey of Observation Through the United States of America and Europe*, we are told that the “theaterscape” of Berlin had an atmosphere to be found in no other city in Europe or the United States. But what was it that made it so unique? Let’s take a closer look at an article published on October 17th 1869, in “*Kladderadatsch*,” a then popular German satirical magazine. This article was addressed to the editor-in-chief of the magazine and was posted by a fictional pub owner called “Bonekamp”:

Our customers are decreasing day by day. The number of theaters in Berlin this Sunday has already reached 23, and if you look at any of the flyers of 17 of those theaters, you can see that only one side of these “theater programs” lists plays or shows, whereas the other is nothing but a menu for food and drinks. If this doesn’t stop, our business will perish. These “theaters” are nothing but low-class drinking establishments having a stage attached in order to get approval as theaters. One customer came to my pub last night, ordered a small bottle of beer and said, “What’s on tonight?” As I thought he asked about food I said, “How about sauerbraten and dumplings?” But the customer said, ‘No, I want to know what’s on tonight!’ to which I replied “Schafskopf, Klabberjass and 66. A hand of Whist might be played as well.” The customer however said “No, stupid, not cards, I want to know what show

² Bundesgesetzblatt des Norddeutschen Bundes (Journal of Law of the North German Confederation), No. 26, Berlin 1869.

is on today!" When I told him, "At my pub such performances are not done yet," he just said "I see," took his hat and left. I was really upset, could not sleep all night, and finally gave up my resistance. I would follow suit and set up a stage in my own pub as well.³

The article further reveals that the publican got the idea to use his apprentices as actors, to allow customers to mingle with actors on stage, and to even start writing some plays himself. The magazine "Kladderadatsch" thus satirizes the liberalization of the right to open theaters which had fired up competition so enormously and had even allowed cheap places to be approved as theaters. Prior to the amendment to the right to unrestricted commerce, there was a clear line that distinguished theaters from taverns, bars, or *Café-chantants* (singing cafés). At *Café-chantants* up to two persons were allowed to sing or tell sketches, but to perform full length plays as well as appearing in costumes on stage was not allowed at all. With the liberalization to open theaters due to the revision of the Commercial Law, all of these restraints were lifted.

This development also changed the traditional concept of what "theater was supposed to be" into something ambiguous and less distinct, and this ambiguity gave theaters a bad name. In 1873, a police notice requested "a crackdown" against such cheap theatrical venues in order to "protect public order and morals." The police also requested that the title "officially recognized theater" (konzessioniertes Theater) should only be granted to "real theaters" (wirkliche Theater), a term used to refer to theaters with regular admission fees and regularly scheduled programs. It can be said that the term "real theater" was created out of concerns for public safety. Only theaters that passed facility checks as well as fire prevention equipment checks would be allowed to call themselves "real theaters." Provisions referring to the safety of theaters in Berlin were listed in 1851 in a Police Ordinance wherein "Article 7" stipulates that authorities can make requests concerning 'safety, morals, security and business matters' when certifying theaters. Strict inspections were to be carried out to reduce the risk of fire on theater premises, and costs were to be shouldered by the theater's owner. According to the police ordinance of 1873, inspections were used as a tool to closely monitor theater buildings and safety measures. The effectiveness of this ordinance is reflected in the fact that, with

³ Bohnekamp 1869. About the right to establish a theatrical venue, and about economic freedom. Letter to the editors of the magazine "Kladderadatsch" written by Bohnekamp, owner of a wheat beer pub (in Berlin).

the exception of the new “Ostend-Theater” in 1877, no application was granted in the 1870s.

Let me give you some more details about Berlin’s theater locations. This chart (fig. 3) shows theater locations from 1869 to the end of the 1870s. The black circles marked 1 and 2 are the court opera and the court theater. All black circles designate already existing theaters, and the white squares depict new theaters being built during this period. “Ostend-Theater,” the aforementioned theater, is no. 16. As Berlin’s city walls were demolished in the 1850s they do not appear on the map, but black circle no. 3 designates “Friedrich-Wilhelm-Theater,” which was the first theater approved as a privately-owned theater within the then existing city walls. This location here in Schumann-Straße (Schumann Street) shows where “Deutsches Theater” (“German Theater”) was built in the 1880s, a theater that would soon after completion play an important role in shaping the theater culture of Berlin. As I mentioned earlier, the introduction of the ‘right of unrestricted commerce’ in 1869 resulted in theaters shooting up all over Berlin, but the venues indicated by the white squares are only those that managed to survive for more than one year. Some of these theaters were not only maintained for more than one year but were still existent at the beginning of the 20th century, and some of them operated even until the 1920s and 30s. Of course, during that time both the name and appearance of many of these theaters changed, as did the owners and renters, but the location of these theaters plays a significant role in shaping Berlin’s theatrical history. Dresdener-Straße (Dresden Street, no. 18 and 19) in Luisenviertel (Luisen Quarter) and Belle-Alliance-Straße (Belle-Alliance Street, no. 21) outside the Hallesches Tor (Hallesches Gate) form the center of theater developments in southern Berlin. The theaters of the northern Kastanienallee (Chestnut Boulevard, no. 15) and of Schönhauser Straße (Schönhaus Street, no. 25) survived until being turned into cinemas in the late 1910s, making this area a popular northern theater location for many years. Alongside the already existing “Werner-Theater” the new “Norbach-Theater,” the predecessor of the ‘Residenz-Theater’ in eastern Blumenstraße (Flower Street), was the most prominent venue of Berlin’s eastern theater development. After actor and theater director Bernhard Rose moved to “Ostend-Theater” (16) in Große Frankfurter Straße (Great Frankfurt Street) in the early 20th century, other theaters followed suite and the street became the most coveted location for “Volkstheater” (popular theater) buildings. With the implementation of the “right to unrestricted commerce” the definition of what “theater was supposed to mean,” what theatrical venues should look like, and where they should be

located had changed dramatically. In the 1880s, reactions against this development resulted in the enactment of new and much stricter theater policies.

As you can see in fig. 1 the number of theaters, which had increased enormously after the introduction of the “right of unrestricted commerce” in 1869, started to decrease in the 1880s. Here you see a map of theater locations from the 1880s, with the black triangle symbol indicating facilities that disappeared or lost the title “theater” during this period. With the exception of number 11, which indicates the “Alhambra-Theater,” all of them were closed between the years of 1881 and 1883.

One of the most important changes concerns fire prevention. A new fire prevention ordinance was implemented in June of 1881. It is called ‘General Instructions of District Police on Fire Prevention in Theaters of Berlin (Allgemeine ortspolizeiliche Vorschriften ueber die Feuerpolizei in den Theatern Berlins). In December of that year, the catastrophic fire at the “Wiener-Ring-Theater” (Vienna Ring Theater) shook Europe, as a result of which the Ministry of the Interior of “Norddeutscher Bund” (“North German confederation”) issued a special ordinance to commissioners of Police of all cities inside its borders. The ordinance declared that “It is necessary to protect the audience” and to “Immediately take any measures that may be considered.” As specific measures it listed “thorough investigation” of “fire extinguishing equipment, corridors, stairs, and exit structures, facilities for reliably shutting off fire, gas equipment inside buildings, and lighting for corridors.”⁴ After an inspection in June of 1881, structural weak points that were considered to endanger spectators in “Tonhalle Theater” (Hall of Sounds, no. 22) were described as follows: “In the event of a fire inside the theater, spectators on each floor (of the three-storied structure) must pass through the staircase and courtyard in front of the hall, and further through the front door. / What is more problematic about this theater is that if a fire breaks out in the front door and people panic, there will be no exit for the audience at all.”⁵ In light of the above-mentioned issues regarding the evacuation of spectators in the event of a fire, improvements were ordered as follows: “The ground floor must be eight meters wide and will be constructed as a passage way without doors. / In order to evacuate spectators from the 2nd and 3rd floors, there must be strongly built special

4 Landesarchiv Berlin [Regional archive Berlin], Rep. 30 Berlin C Polizeipräsidium [Police head quarter] Title 74, Th 241: Feuersicherheiten in den Theatern [Fire prevention measures for theaters] 1846-82, p. 72.

5 Regional archive Berlin, Th 498: Tonhalle, p. 16.

staircases on the left and right sides of the hall and on the side wings of the upper floors, which lead directly to the courtyard. / Buildings in front of the plot must be separated from the theater itself by solid walls without doors.”⁶ This document also specifies a deadline, stating that “the above measures must be implemented at the latest by October 15th 1873. In the event that the deadline is not met the theater will be shut down.” On December 18th, theater owner Ferdinand Rosseck submitted two plan drawings to provide “emergency exits” in order to get police approval. The Police Fire Department did not reject Rosseck’s drawings but ordered him to make additional improvements: “1. The exit of the stairs must lead directly to the courtyard. 2. The exit from the second or third floor must be twice as wide as the stairs. Doors must be set up by punching out walls to open into the garden. 4. The roof above the stage space must be provided with two ventilation valves with openings of about 4 square meters, the ventilation valves must be set up so that they can be opened by children at any time.”⁷ The demanding to build so many additional structures to ensure the safety of spectators was deemed necessary after the aforementioned fire catastrophe at the “Wiener-Ring-Theater.” As Ferdinand Rosseck’s “Tonhalle” did not meet the deadline set for October 15th, he was informed that starting December 14th, the place was no longer allowed to operate as a theater. “Tonhalle” had been known as the “Tonhalle-Theater” since it was granted approval in 1869 but became known as “Etablissement-Tonhalle” (Variety Theater) after being banned from putting on theater performances. The black triangles represent the theaters that lost their licence between 1880 and 1889 (fig. 4). In line with this transition, Ferdinand Rosseck, who had held the title of “Schauspielunternehmer” (theater entrepreneur), was afterwards just referred to as “Schankwirt” (publican). “Tonhalle” was a dance and song hall with no fixed seats and as such one of the theatrical venues that lost their right to call themselves “theater”.⁸

The decline of the number of theaters in the 1880s was due not only to tightened regulations regarding the buildings that housed the theaters, but also to tighter rules concerning the business side, which made it even more difficult to obtain a license for opening a new theater. Since the beginning of

6 Ibid., p. 28.

7 Ibid., p. 31.

8 See the photography of the interior of “Tonhalle Theater” (Hall of Sounds Theater) in Jansen 1990.

the 1880s, an intensifying debate over the revision of “Article 32” of the Business Law was going on throughout Germany. The details of this debate can be found in the records of the German Reichstag, but here I will only highlight the most important points. The revised “Article 32” of the Business Law stated that “to open a theatrical business requires approval. Unless there are serious considerations concerning the liability of the applicant any application must be granted.” This provision had led to a dramatic increase in the number of theaters since 1869. In the 1880s, this part was revised again as follows: “Theatrical performers need authorization to conduct business. It is the responsibility of the authority in charge to make sure that the business to be approved of is in compliance with requirements of morals, arts and finances. If there are reasons for doubt concerning an applicant’s liability it must be denied.”⁹ In 1869, the emphasis was on “must be granted,” but the amended text changed that term to “must be denied” if deemed necessary, thus giving the authorities greater discretion in denying an approval. The following reasons for this amendment were given by a proponent in the Imperial Parliament session of March 17th 1880:

Freedom of business has led to an increase in theaters but has also led to a decline of the quality of German theaters. Theater managers are often nothing but pub owners who sell drinks alongside some theater performances staged in their pubs. With flimsy farces and bands playing light-hearted pieces of music, such theaters aim at attracting the masses. Even if the contents of those texts are not particularly obscene, they often contain expressions of vulgar speech and low regards for morality. / I do not think that this application for an amendment will improve the situation and will eliminate such evils at all. However, we do propose this amendment, because we do not see the necessity to allow non-professionals to run a theater at all. We want to give the word “trustworthy” used in these provisions a positive meaning and give the authorities in charge greater discretion in denying an approval. This means however that they must explain the reasons for doing so.¹⁰

After implementation, the amendment did not initially seem successful in eliminating the danger of “giving permission to everybody wanting to become a theater manager” at all. This changed only in 1883 when businesses

⁹ Steno-Berichte des Deutschen Reichstags [Stenographic reports of the German Parliament], March 17, 1880, p. 69.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 69.

that would be called “theater” and businesses designated as “non-theater” businesses were treated separately. The government stipulated “Article 33a” as an amendment to “Article 33,” which originally regulated the businesses of restaurants and similar facilities and tried to make the distinction more explicit. The first part of this article states: “All kinds of musical performances, shows, drama performances or any other kinds of entertainments that are of no great value concerning arts and enlightenment must be shown in restaurants or similar spaces. Anyone who wishes to do so, even if already in possession of a license qualifying them as a theater entrepreneur, will hitherto need a special license.” (Jansen 1990: 68) Since “Article 33” regulates restaurants and similar facilities, authorities could adjust the number of permits in a given area based on demand. This article thus allowed to limit the number of “singing halls” referred to as “Tingeltangel,” and to protect theaters licensed under “Article 32” from the possible competition of such facilities.

It was, however, not easy to distinguish non-theaters like “entertainment places” (Etablissements), from theaters with “high regard for moral and artistic values.” For example, when Franz Dorn became its impresario in 1886 the “Wintergarten Theater” (Wintergarten-Varieté-Theater, no. 28) was given approval as a theater venue under the condition that “artistic values must always be considered when performing.” But impresario Dorn, who wanted to stage a wide variety of performing arts at “Wintergarten Theater,” found that such constraints posed quite a challenge: “We constantly try to do what the law asks us to do, but it is difficult.” In order to comply with Article 32, he therefore asked that a special clause be added to Article 33a that would allow “songs and plays” in which “those artistic values are not always clearly noticeable”, which was granted.¹¹ “Wintergarten Theater” opened as an annex to Central Hotel which was built in the 1880s in the close vicinity of Friedrichstraße-Station, an urban elevated railway. “Wintergarten Theater” was located in the hotel’s “winter garden,” from which it took its name. The building was rectangular, and the roof had an arched dome made of glass to capture natural light. In the center of the picture, you can see the cafeteria, from which it was possible to watch the performances on the left stage while eating and drinking. A balcony was set up in the back, which overlooked the entire garden-like space with its variety of plants alongside the hotel’s corridor. The theater is also famous for the first public and commercial cinema show in Germany in 1895, which was part of its variety program.

¹¹ Landesarchiv Berlin, Th 1440, Wintergarten, p. 8.

As theaters and non-theaters were treated as different types of businesses both entertainment aspects as well as literary and artistic aspects became important for commercial theaters. In cooperation with “distinguished performing artists” Adolph L’Arronge, who had acquired the land of the former “Friedrich-Wilhelm-Straße-Theater,” opened in 1883 “Deutsches Theater” (“German Theater”, no. 3). The theater has a horseshoe-shaped seating capacity for 1600 people, indicating a preference for a “closed and focused space” like that found in “Hoftheater” (Court Theater). The design of the garden is not given much thought, but the “fire-resistant” structure of the theater is particularly emphasized in the application for approval. “The new theater uses non-flammable materials and is using electric lighting instead of gas lighting to eliminate the risk of fire.” (Dreifuss 1987:57) The exterior of the Lessing Theater, which was established in 1888, has a stately appearance resembling that of the Imperial National Theater, and the interior structure includes “wide corridors”, “many doors”, and “many exits” to the outside. (Freydank 1988: 307) It appears to have incorporated the modifications of the 1889 Fire Ordinance. The “Lessing Theater” is built in an open space alongside Friedrich-Karl-Ufer, a Spree riverside street, a location apparently chosen with consideration of the heightened security concerns of the 1880s. Lessing Theater was especially famous for staging works of “contemporary playwrights.” In the 1880s the “German Theater” as well as the “Lessing Theater” and the “Berlin Theater” (no. 8), which is located on the land of the former “Walhalla Variety Theater”, were founded. These three theaters are the most representative venues of Berlin’s theatrical scene in the 1880s.

In the 1880s, the provisions of the law were powerful enough both to separate theater from non-theater businesses and to help create a new style of theaters and of theatrical repertoire. In 1888, Maximilian Harden’s article “Berlin as Theater Capital, Berlin in 1888” (“Berlin als Theaterhauptstadt, Berlin 1888”) was published. In this article, the author probes Berlin’s potential as a “theater capital” in Europe, surpassing even Paris and London. He also points out the opening of the above-mentioned three theaters. For Harden the relationship between institutions and culture was a reciprocal one that makes it irrelevant to ask which one precedes which. It is, however, no exaggeration to say that, in the 1800s, changes concerning the structural and the business side of theaters, combined with changes concerning artistic requirements, contributed, to quite a large extent, in giving Berlin’s theaters a new outlook.

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Figures

If no other reference is listed the documents are taken from Itoda 2008.

Fig. 1: Number of Theaters from 1850 – 1930

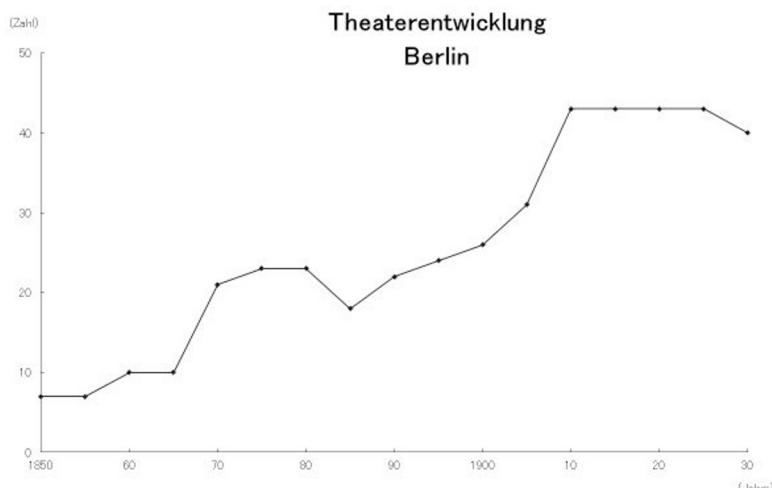


Fig. 2: Number of theater applications approved or denied before and after the implementation of the revised "Article 32" in 1869

資料2 営業法32条による劇場の認可数と不許可数

	認可数	不許可数
1848	5	3
1849	1	4
1850	1	3
1851	1	4
1852	2	3
1857	1	1
1858	1	2
1859	3	4
1860	1	4
1862	1	1
1865	2	2
1866	1	7
1867	?	10
1868	1	5
1869	34	9
1870	37	3
1871	14	1
1872	22	?

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*Fig. 3 (above): Distribution of theaters from 1869 until the late 1870s;
Fig. 4 (below): Distribution of theaters between 1880 and 1889*

