



## Straussmania: Popculture of the 19<sup>th</sup> century

The multimedia project Straussmania, beginning in December 2022, is dedicated to the places and protagonists of popular culture of the 19th century. In individual chapters, Straussmania tells of remarkable venues throughout the districts of Vienna such as the New World (Neue Welt) in Hietzing, Sperl in Leopoldstadt, and the Apollo Hall (Apollosaal) in Schottenfeld. All of the visited locations appropriately vibrate in three-quarter time because they are connected to the music of the Strauss family and their contemporaries. Straussmania is a joint project of ORF.at, the Vienna Institute for Cultural and Contemporary History (vicca.at) and the Library of Vienna.

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## Johann Strauß Theater - from operetta temple to Scala Theater

### Philipp Maurer

The Johann Strauss Theater was located at Favoritenstraße 8 in Wieden in Vienna's fourth district. This venue, which unfortunately no longer exists today, was one of the first addresses for operettas at the beginning of the 20th century. It was built in 1908 according to the plans of architect Eduard Prandl and was the largest theater in the city with 1,192 seats. The first director was Leopold Müller. In 1912, his son, Erich Müller, became director. The theater co-owner was composer Richard von Goldberger, whose greatest success, "The Star of Aswan," premiered in Berlin and led to a controversy with the theater there.

Noted at the opening on October 30, 1908:

It was a jubilant performance marking the 60th anniversary of the reign of Emperor Franz Josef, with a festive poem by Wolfgang Madjera (this text is available in the Wieden district museum). From today's point of view, this was a horribly pitiful and bombastic poem, but it was absolutely characteristic of the time. It could be great entertainment if properly performed. This reading was followed by a festive chorus, led by Hans Wagner, performing the choral waltz *Wine, Women and Song* (*Wein, Weib und Gesang*) by Johann Strauß junior, performed by the Vienna Schubert Society. Future theater performances included the Strauß operetta "One Thousand and One Nights", and an adaptation of his operetta "Indigo and the 40 Thieves" which were held after the death of Johann Strauß junior.

#### Premieres and series successes:

October 11, 1912: Emmerich Kálmán, *The Gypsy Band Leader* (*Der Zigeunerprimas*) with Alexander Girardi in the leading role.

February 27, 1914: Carl Michael Ziehrer, *The Stupid Heart* (*Das dumme Herz*).

November 9, 1914: Oscar Straus, *Rund um die Liebe*.

November 17, 1915: Emmerich Kálmán, *The Gypsy Princess* (*Die Csardasfürstin*) world premiere with more than 500 local performances.

September 21, 1917: Emmerich Kálmán, *Miss Suzy* (*Die Faschingsfee*).

January 30, 1920: Emmerich Kálmán, *The Little Dutch Girl* (*Das Hollandweibchen*).

September 14, 1923: Ralph Benatzky, *Ein Märchen aus Florenz*.

October 30, 1925: Franz Lehár, *Paganini*, world premier with Carl Clewing.

May 26, 1927: Robert Stolz, *Märchen im Schnee*

March 21, 1930: Emmerich Kálmán, *The Violet of Montmartre* (*Das Veilchen vom Montmartre*)  
 Franz Lehár, *The Royal Child* (*Das Fürstenkind*), more than 200 performances

The theater held a license to perform both operettas and revues. Josephine Baker performed here with her famous show *Black on White* (*Schwarz auf Weiß*) in 1928 (the rival Ronacher Theater did not have such a license). In the summer, the theater offered plays by Ibsen, Hauptmann and Bahr.

Due to the dire economic situation and new popularity of movies with sound, the theater was converted to a movie cinema in 1931 and expanded capacity to 1,400 seats. It was renamed the Scala Cinema. On September 29, 1931, the new cinema opened with the world premiere of *The Congress Dances* (*Der Kongress tanzt*); the lavishly produced film starring Lilian Harvey, Willy Fritsch and Conrad Veidt is set against the backdrop of the Congress of Vienna. It is considered a highlight of German operetta film with music by Werner Richard Heymann.

In 1933 the venue was rebuilt, renamed again to the Scala Theater, and from 1933 to 1938 managed by Rudolf Beer. In 1938, after the invasion of German troops, Rudolf Beer took his own life.

During the Second World War the theater again served as a cinema but stopped operating in 1944. In 1945, the theater was confiscated by the Russian occupation forces as German property. Immediately after the end of the war, theater operations resumed, especially revue theater productions. Austrian artists found employment there, including the actor and accordion virtuoso Hannes Thanheiser (1925 - 2014).

Thanheiser recounted: "In bombed-out, destroyed Vienna there was nothing, but one had survived! And people wanted entertainment!" The Scala Theater provided entertainment with revues, popular music and dance shows, French accordion music and Russian folk songs. Besides locals there were many Soviet soldiers in the audience who also appreciated the cheerful atmosphere and even came to the theater in uniform. Thanheiser said that they were guarded by those officers - if anyone misbehaved in any way, they were immediately dealt with. "Yet you could get a decent tip or vodka from the officers," Thanheiser recalled in conversation with Philipp Maurer in 2014 at his accordion museum in Melk, Austria.

The theater was taken over by a group of Socialist and Communist repatriated emigres from Zurich. Along with support of the Soviet administration and the Communist Party of Austria (KPÖ), with much fanfare the theater was reopened as the New Theater in the Scala on September 16, 1948. Headlining was Johann Nepomuk Nestroy's "*Höllenangst*" with music by Hanns Eisler. Wolfgang Heinz served as theater director. The cast included Karl Paryla, Otto Tausig, Therese Giehse, Fritz Imhoff, Helene Thimig, Dorothea Neff, Eva Zilcher as well as director Heinz himself.

The next opening on October 2, 1948 was the world premiere of Peter Preses' and Ulrich Becher's *Der Bockerer*. The Scala Theater offered modern, politically-engaged, enlightened theater - from Lessing to Nestroy to Brecht. Each season offered at least one play by Nestroy, in addition those of Raimund, Anzengruber, Grillparzer, and Shakespeare, plus works of American and Soviet authors.

Highlights:

October 2, 1948: Bertold Brecht, *Mother Courage and Her Children* (*Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder*), with Therese Giehse as Mother Courage.

October 31, 1953: Bertold Brecht, *The Mother* (*Die Mutter*), with Helene Weigel as Pelagea Vlassova (Mother) and Ernst Busch as Pavel Vlassov.

June 1956: Last performance before closing: Bertold Brecht, *The Life of Galileo* (*Das Leben des Galilei*), with a farewell speech given by Otto Tausig.

Social Democratic Vienna City Councilor for Culture, Hans Mandl, refused to renew the theater's license. The building was demolished in 1959-60. The Wieden District Museum unveiled a commemorative plaque in memory of the Johann Strauss Theater at Favoritenstraße 8 on September 30, 1999.