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Berlin's Darling.

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BERLIN'S DARLING

By Klaus Mann

DR. FRANZ J. HORCH

AUTHOR'S REPRESENTATIVE

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Theatrical life here -- once most colorful and stimulating -- has become, on the whole, rather dull and mediocre. Right now, however, with a dreary season already approaching its end, Berlin theater-goers have a real sensation: Gustaf Gruendgens, after an absence of about two years, plays at the Deutsches Theater again!

Who is this popular and charming character, Gustaf Gruendgens? Outside of the German-speaking world, his name is all but unknown. In these parts, however, he has been for quite some time the most successful actor and director on both screen and stage. Gruendgens is handsome, clever, glamorous, sophisticated -- in other words, almost (but not quite!) a Germanic Noel Coward. The story of his career is not without amusing features. ~~It is the story of a man who has been rather closely, at least during its early years,~~

~~It all began back in the roaring twenties. Gustaf, at the age of 25 or so, had already established himself as the star of one of Germany's vanguard theaters, the Kammerspiele in Hamburg. It was there that my first play was produced, with enterprising young Gruendgens acting as director. The cast included him, in one of the major parts -- co-starred with my sister, Erika, who later became his wife.~~

The promising young actor was soon enough discovered by the theater czar of pre-Hitler Germany, Max Reinhardt. Gustaf's debut in the capital took place at the Deutsches Theater; his first part was that of a vicious degenerate and blackmailer in Ferdinand Bruckner's drama, Criminals. Almost alarmingly good in that particular role, Gruendgens became a celebrity over night. Berlin audiences were under the spell of his nonchalant, iridescent charm. Whatever he did -- the metropolitan public found it "kolossal," "gross-artig," "phantastisch!" Whatever he touched -- it was a success,

and became known as one of the
famous in the capital at the
time of the war.

a triumph!

But ~~he did~~ ^{didn't} by no means ^{did he} content himself with being just a popular entertainer; on the contrary, he was intellectually ambitious -- a left-wing high-brow, the most fashionable parlor-pink. Orson Wells-like rather than Noel-Cowardish, at that particular point of his development, he startled the snobs with bold artistic experiments and introduced himself to Communist meetings as a champion of the revolutionary cause.

When the Nazis took over, in 1933, our rebellious matinée idol found himself in a slightly embarrassing situation. Fortunately, my sister -- member of a politically notorious clan and a well-known anti-Nazi in her own right -- had just divorced him, otherwise poor Gustaf might have actually been in trouble. But even so, he had the reputation of a "cultural Bolshevik," and could not be sure whether the new masters would forgive him for the subversive vagaries of his past.

Yet, being immaculately "Aryan," he decided to take a chance and stay in Germany, while most of his liberal friends left the country or disappeared in concentration camps. Of course, the ex-Communist had to be a little careful at first. But before long fortune smiled at him again -- this time in the person of Hermann Goering's fair-haired fiancée, Actress Emmy Sonnemann. The moderately gifted ingénue, formerly hidden away in a provincial town, had been called to Berlin by her powerful lover. How could she face the exacting critics of the capital? She needed a good director. Gustaf -- famed for his skill in handling clumsy beginners -- seemed just the fellow she was looking for. He made friends with Emmy. Grateful for his instruction, she persuaded her fiancé to pardon the naughty boy and allow him to play again.

Goering was smitten with Gruendgens' performance as Mephistopheles, in Goethe's Faust. How delightfully demoniac he was! How elegantly corrupt! How irresistibly wicked! The jolly Reichsmarschall took a

fancy for the graceful devil -- which meant the beginning of Gustaf's ^{second} rise to ~~staggering heights~~ glory.

If he had been successful in the days of the Weimar Republic, ^{now} he had not only success but also power, which is so much sweeter and more precious. His fat protector gave him a country estate, a palace, and a title: Gustaf was appointed Staatsrat (Counsellor of State). ^{State Coun:or} Also, he became Intendant (supreme chief) of the State Theater -- which was even more important. He toured Europe with his own troupe; he produced films, operas, classical dramas, musical comedies; he acted, directed, supervised, he made cultural policy, he was the indefatigable, ingenious maitre de plaisir of Greater Germany. An uncrowned king in the realm of theatrical life, he was indeed ~~one~~ one of the Third Reich's most colorful, most celebrated figures.

Was he a Nazi at heart? Naturally not -- just an opportunist. Powerful enough to take chances, he even ventured occasionally to help Jewish or liberal friends persecuted by the Gestapo. Goering's friend could afford noble gestures. Besides the Herr Staatsrat may have considered it wise to keep up his contacts with anti-Nazi circles. You never can tell...

When Hitler's might began to totter, towards the end of the war, Gruendgens found that the moment had come for him to abandon the sinking ship. Rumor has it that he quarreled with Goering, with whom he had managed to get along for so many prosperous years. In any case, the director of the State Theater quit and tried to make himself invisible. The safest hiding place in the disintegrating Reich of 1944 was the Wehrmacht; so our versatile mime became a soldier, playing, for a change, the role of a humble army interpreter in the German-occupied Netherlands. Nazi defeat brought him back to Berlin. There he was when the Red Army entered the city.

Maybe nothing would have happened to him, if he had had ~~enough~~ enough tact and common sense to keep quiet for some time. But he was

impatient -- overly eager to repeat his little stunt of 1933 and change sides once more. The old operator, trying to be smart, got himself into trouble. He was arrested by Soviet authorities.

His imprisonment lasted nine months -- a pretty long time for a man of Gruendgens' temperament and ambition. Yet, according to his own report, life in the Russian-operated jail was quite ^a bearable, the prisoners were fairly well taken care of. Besides, ~~also~~ Gustaf, ~~and~~ ^(naturally) ~~most prisoners~~, enjoyed particular privileges -- having captivated the Russian commander's heart, just as he had once bewitched the most blasé audiences of republican Berlin and the most ruthless chiefs of the Hitler gang.

So brilliant was the job he did as a director and master of ceremonies of the improvised prison theater that the Russians were reluctant to let him go: he was too useful to them as an entertainer. However, competent actors were badly needed in the capital -- and as for Gustaf's dubious political record, some of his friends were doing their best to clear it.

Had he not always been outspokenly anti-Nazi? Had he not used his influence to ~~help~~ save many an endangered Jew and democrat? True, he had belonged to the top strata of the Nazi hierarchy; but he had hardly ever said, "Heil Hitler." If he had been compelled to praise the Fuehrer in public statements, his intimates had heard the most irreverent cracks from him. If he had made compromises and played ball with the powers that ^{were} -- there were so many others who had done the same thing! Why should Gustaf Gruendgens be more heroic and uncompromising than the majority of the German people? After all, he was just an actor...

One day last month, he was taken by the Russians from jail directly to the Deutsches Theater -- the very place where his Berlin career had started, almost two decades before. A contract had already been prepared by the theater's new chief, Gustav von Wangenheim, a German

Communist who spent the past ~~years~~ thirteen years in exile. Gruendgens signed. His first role was the leading character in Carl Sternheim's comedy, The Snob -- a clever satire on the German bourgeoisie, still uncannily timely, even though written in the faraway days of Emperor William II.

The opening night was by far the greatest theatrical event in Germany since the end of the war. With the theater sold out days in advance, black-market prices for seats soared to staggering heights. Berliners paid thousands of marks to witness the triumphant comeback of their favourite.

At the rise of the curtain, "the snob," according to the author's directives, is all alone on the stage -- standing behind a desk, with a letter in his hand. Gruendgens had to stand there for five or six minutes at least, smiling and taking bows, before the roaring applause calmed down and he could finally get his opening lines across. It was indeed an extraordinary ovation which repeated itself after the end of the show. The stage was submerged with flowers; the audience -- hysterical with enthusiasm -- might have gone on clapping and shouting for hours, if the police had not closed the house at last.

(What was the meaning of this clamorous demonstration? Did the Berliners just hail the return of their most popular star? Were they just thrilled by Gustaf's histrionic verve and brilliancy? But then, it has to be admitted, and was actually pointed out by several ~~of~~ local critics, that he was not at his best in that particular part. Sternheim's dialogue -- crisp, poignant, concise -- requires above all precision, rhythm, intellectual intensity. Gruendgens was too soft, too playful, too coquettish: he smiled too much, was too eager to please. Another actor playing a minor role in the same production -- Paul Bildt, a veteran ~~actor~~ ^{of the Berlin stage} -- was in

fact more effective and ~~was in keeping with the style~~ ^{at home} of that sardonic farce. Yet Gruendgens stole the show -- at the opening night at least.)

Was handsome Gustaf cheered as a political martyr? Was the inordinate applause meant as a demonstration against those who arrested him? He may not have expected such a tumultuous reception. Was he moved or embarrassed? If so, he did not show it; he just stood there and smiled -- as attractive as ever, with white tie, pink complexion, blond toupee, and all: the indestructable darling of pre-Nazi, Nazi and post-Nazi Berlin.

But it ~~didn't~~ not far from
long to answer this sudden
question. Soon and he was his
old glances self again -