Alfred Kerr (1867-1948)

Born Alfred Kempner, Alfred Kerr is remembered as one of Germany’s most important theater and film critics, and as a writer with literary ambitions who worked tirelessly to establish criticism as its own genre; in particular, his voluminous writing on playwriting, stagecraft, and performance demonstrates the crucial role of the critic in co-constructing theater as a social medium. His importance lies in his support for progressive tendencies in literature, in his championing of innovative dramatists whose work was remembered by posterity (e.g., Henrik Ibsen, Gerhart Hauptmann, Arthur Schnitzler, Frank Wedekind), and in the highly polished and witty style of his writing that makes his critiques more memorable than many of the plays he wrote about. Kerr’s influence was strongest in the period 1895 to the end of World War I, though he continued to write into the Weimar and Nazi periods. His *Gesammelte Schriften* (*Collected Works*) were published between 1917 and 1920. The first five volumes, *Die Welt im Drama* (*The World in Drama*) brings together in book format Kerr’s numerous theater reviews of the previous twenty-five years. Kerr’s books were burned by the Nazis, and he was forced to spend most of the 30s and 40s abroad, taking British citizenship and returning to Germany only shortly before his death. In addition to criticism, Kerr also wrote poetry, memoirs, and travel narratives.

Key Critical Works:

Berman, Russell A. “The Critical Model of Alfred Kerr.” *Selecta: Journal of the Pacific Northwest Council on Foreign Languages*, Vol. 1 (1980): 41-44. A brief introduction to the principles behind Kerr’s criticism.

Berman, Russell A. “Literary Criticism from Empire to Dictatorship, 1870-1933.” In *A History of German Literary Criticism, 1730-1980*. Kerr’s role within the system of criticism in the period.

Carr, Gilbert J. “'Organic' Contradictions in Alfred Kerr's Theatre Criticism.” *Oxford German Studies* Vol. 14 (1983): 111-124. Shows how Kerr emphasized both organic ideas of expression, and rule-based structural demands in his theater criticism. The other contradiction is between the freedom of critical expression and the actual institutional constraints on critical practice.

Knight, Elizabeth R. “Alfred Kerr: A Critic of the Drama.” The only dissertation in English devoted entirely to Kerr’s drama criticism.

Loram, Ian C. “Alfred Kerr's America.” *German Quarterly*, (38:2), 1965 Mar, 164-71. Cites selections from Kerr’s travel memoirs in the US. Kerr’s impression of the US was mostly positive.

Santini, Daria. “Beyond Theatre Criticism: Alfred Kerr’s Autobiographical Exile Journals.” *The Modern Language Review*, Vol. 107, No. 2 (April 2012): 522-539. Deprived of his main object – the German theater – while in exile, Kerr turned more to memoir and diary formats, which have been published gradually through the years following his death. The essential features of this aspect of Kerr’s writing are detailed in this article.

Tom Beebee