

## ROBERT HANDICOTT

“Presenting Poems Differently:” Poetical Body-Theatre in Luebeck, December ‘85

The Baltic seaport of Luebeck is remembered by students of German literature as the birthplace of Thomas and Heinrich Mann. Heinrich, the elder brother, is best known in English-speaking countries as the author of *Professor Unrat*, the novel from which, with significant changes, the film, *The Blue Angel*, was adapted. The novels of Thomas Mann, on the other hand, are more familiar in their own right to English readers, their availability in paperback ensured by Mann’s status as a twentieth-century master of prose fiction who is mentioned by critics in the same breath as Proust and Joyce. Forty years after the first impact of *The Blue Angel*, Thomas Mann’s fame outside Germany, too, was enlarged by a film adaptation: that of his novella, *Death in Venice*.

Luebeck has not forgotten her distinguished literary sons, any more than she has forgotten her heyday in the Late Middle Ages, when she was one of the richest and most powerful members of the Hanseatic League. The Draegerhouse Museum in the Koenigstrasse devotes considerable space to its permanent documentation of the brothers’ lives and work; while near the top of the Mengstrasse one can still see the “Buddenbrook House”, the patrician residence which belonged to the Mann family for fifty years until the death of the boys’ father. The big house is inevitably connected with Thomas Mann’s early, partly autobiographical novel, *Buddenbrooks* (1901; subtitled “The Decline of a Family”), which was specifically mentioned in the citation for Mann’s Nobel Prize of 1929. *Buddenbrooks* is a wonderfully prepared, full five-course feast of a novel, and it thoroughly deserves its worldwide reputation and readership; in Luebeck, however, so vividly evoked in its pages, the novel is revered in some circles as if it were Holy Writ.

Actually, only the facade of the original Buddenbrook House still stands. Luebeck had the great misfortune to be chosen by the British as the target for their retaliatory raid after the German air assault upon Coventry; and during the night before Palm Sunday, 1942, in the only bombing Luebeck was to suffer during the war, a fifth of the historic Old Town, including the three biggest churches, the old merchants’ quarter, and part of the City Hall, was reduced to rubble and ashes. Forty years on, the seven-spired medieval profile of the city is restored; but inside Luebeck Cathedral, for instance, repair work still goes on. Much money and effort meanwhile continue to be spent on the renovation of important old buildings deteriorating with age, for example towards the River Trave end of the Mengstrasse. Often coupled with the problem of

preservation, of course, is the problem of relevant use: there is a limit to the number of museums the most historic city needs. Behind its facade, the new Buddenbrook House is a bank and a small art gallery.

On my first afternoon in Luebeck I obtained a copy of the cultural diary, and discovered that that evening in the Music Hall of the Arts Centre, beginning at 8.30, I could see "Poetical Body-Theatre" (Das lyrische Koerpertheater), a program of poetry and mime. I had read several articles about attempts, usually by societies of authors and friends, to bring traditional and contemporary poetry to a wider audience in Germany; and since "Poetical Body-Theatre" sounded interestingly like another such attempt whatever the merits of the show might prove, a little after 8 I located the Zentrum (it turned out to be down the River Trave end of the Mengstrasse), found the right door (it was the one round the corner), and paid my five marks to the girl behind the bar at the top of the stairs, who assured me I had found the right place, I was just the first member of the public to arrive.

A glance at a copy of the Zentrum's own monthly program made it clear that this was a venue for "alternative" entertainment. The description of the present evening's offering adopted a hopeful but uncertainly apologetic tone, which I doubted I would find in announcements from the city's subscription theatres.

On the principle of "presenting poems differently", a solo performance will be given in which German poems from several centuries are presented by means of both body and voice. The special feature of the program is the extension of the purely spoken interpretation into the dimension of dramatic play with the images and contents of the texts. The poem becomes a theatrical event far beyond the conventional recitation. Thus the program also offers people for whom poems "do nothing" the opportunity of bringing this beautiful literary form and its contents nearer, as well as presenting in a new way that which is familiar and well-loved to the poetry-interested public.

I am not without sympathy for the author of this passage: I had to compose a blurb for myself once, too.

The stage area was a dais, perhaps four metres wide by three metres deep. Twenty to thirty chairs were arranged in three rows before it, the first row less than two metres from the edge of the dais. If people had been happy to cram against the walls (or hang from the enormous, venerable wooden rafters) perhaps a hundred could have been fitted in;

but almost all would have faced the stage from the same direction, for it backed on to the rear wall, while the corner to the audience's right was divided off with canvas to provide a dressing room. It was from this place, shortly after 8.30, that a young man emerged, dressed and made up as a clown; and what he managed to do in the next hour and a half, with the aid only of a rickety chair, a cane, and three coats, was genuinely remarkable.

He gave us poems from Anon to Hans Magnus Enzensberger in chronological order, with some shuffling for theme. He risked the barest, most picked-over anthology pieces, from Goethe's "Found" to Erich Kaestner's "Ascent of Man", and brought all of them off. He also surprised us — more often than Leonard Teale did in his "Quiet Achievers" program — with unfamiliar poems which were accessible and really impressive at a first hearing: Schiller's 1797 lament for the American Indians, for example, and Kaestner's 1919 "If We Had Won the War". A sentence of concise introduction cleared the way. The time-honoured roles of Goethe's Sorcerer and Apprentice, the ironic personas of Busch and Brecht were all grist to the mill. Brecht, the most performed poet of the evening, appeared in the widest range both chronologically and in terms of theme and emotion. "Children's Crusade 1939" has always seemed to me a limp poem on the page; but here it was transformed and given its full dramatic impact.

In Tucholsky's "To the Public" the actor turned his bottom to us and shouted between his legs "Are you really so stupid?" Yet at all times during the performance the audience was respected — even when the point of the cane was no more than a foot from the face of a front-row spectator. The polite "And now, Ladies and Gentlemen" was not part of the clowning; the face-paint was not an excuse for insults or cruelty. Most importantly, however, the *poems* were respected. The parallel mime, the "dramatic play with images and contents", never bordered on a Norman Gunston-style travesty, even when, as in Goethe's "Found", the images were entirely metaphorical. The portrayal of cats was particularly good — not Jellicle Cats here, but Rilke's panther, and the lion, tiger and leopards of Schiller's "Glove".

Here was an actor, a very competent actor, who had acquainted himself intimately with the texts he had chosen to interpret, and who really *delivered* them. How much more entertaining the program was than some of the poetry readings I have attended, in which poets have depended too much on their authorship for most of their impact on the listeners, and have made so little and such disappointing use of voice, expression, gesture and movement.

For a traveller from North Queensland, Luebeck, with just twice the population of Townsville, though hardly the cultural capital of West

Germany, offers much to admire. Apart from the many historical monuments, the bookshops alone — the range of titles they carry, the service they provide if what one wants is out of stock — are enough to drive one crazy. As a holiday-maker, however, as a visitor whose stay cannot be long, one is apt, in the excitement of exploration and discovery, or in rushing to the theatre or to this or that concert, to imagine cultural opportunities necessarily mean more here than at home. The fact, that one is experiencing the culture through the medium of a language acquired by study, inclines one to be impressed, easily pleased and optimistic. One tends, maybe, to construct and preserve in one's mind an image of city and society as charming and misleading as the Buddenbrook facade. But what, one might ask, do the history and traditions of Luebeck mean to her stevedores, for example? How many teenagers in the city know who Thomas Mann was, or could truthfully say they read even one of his stories? And what of poetry, so little regarded in Australia, the concern, outside classroom and lecture theatre, seemingly of poets and pretenders only? Does it really engage more of the public's time and intelligence in North Germany than in North Queensland?

The brevity of my stop-over in Luebeck does not permit me to answer such questions with authority. I can only report that on December 12, 1985, in the Zentrum on the corner of the Mengstrasse and An der Untertrave, a fascinating, totally committed performance of "Lyrisches Koerpertheater" was loudly applauded by an enthusiastic audience of ten.

## PHILIP NEILSEN

### WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS

#### AN INTERVIEW WITH PETER CAREY

- PN: You once said: "It took me three novels to begin to know how to tell a story".
- PC: Well, I think that when I started writing, all of the books that I admired were like, for example, Beckett's novels. Admiration of Beckett's novels doesn't necessarily lead a young writer into thinking about a well-constructed story. They're just a continuum of humorous despair or something. And similarly, I suppose, you can look at Kafka, which is somebody I like a lot. Never realising back then, that he was a comic genius. I didn't know anything then about ordinary story-telling — stories with beginnings and endings and everything.