

ALLYSON FIDDLER

Jelinek, *Burgtheater*

‘Man kann ja nicht immer lochen, net wahr’ (*Burgtheater*, p. 105)

Elfriede Jelinek’s literary status may have been confirmed by the decision to award her the Nobel Prize for literature (2004), but the event reportedly caught the publishing world completely off guard, discussion surrounding the jury’s choice reverberated throughout the international press, and the range of Austrian reactions – from fellow authors to members of the public to official representatives of Austrian politics and culture – was widely polarised. Such polarisation is a characteristic that has marked the reception of Jelinek’s entire *œuvre*: her approach to writing has never failed to provoke controversy.

Jelinek has been an equally prolific producer of dramas and prose writings, but it is as a novelist that she has achieved greatest recognition. This may simply reflect society’s prioritisation of the novel over drama and the fact that the reading public tend to read novels, not plays; but it may also have something to do with the fact that we seem to tolerate density of prose in the novel form far more than in the drama, even if Jelinek’s later postdramatic ‘texts for the theatre’, are in any case envisaged more as reading material than as playscripts.¹ The most famous works – and the ones that have been translated most into other languages – are her novels *Die Liebhaberinnen* (1975), *Die Klavierspielerin* (1983), and *Lust* (1989). These also happen to be amongst the many of her works that deal, broadly speaking, with a feminist subject matter.

But Jelinek is also a landmark dramatist, perhaps less for a particular play or theatre text than for the challenge she has directed at this genre in

1 Jelinek’s later dramas are described by the playwright as texts that are intended for the theatre, but not for a theatre production: ‘diese Texte sind für das Theater gedacht, aber nicht für eine Theateraufführung’ (‘Nachbemerkung’, *Macht nichts. Eine kleine Trilogie des Todes* (Reinbek, 1999), p. 85).

nearly thirty plays and theatre texts to date.² Her few essay publications on theatre aesthetics make clear the strength of the playwright's objections to traditional forms of theatre and traditional styles of character-acting,³ and it is her ability to engage with these questions often with fundamentally innovative and quite uncomfortable results that has been most highly praised by those who appreciate her work. Heiner Müller once remarked: 'Was mich interessiert an den Texten von Elfriede Jelinek, ist der Widerstand, den sie leisten gegen das Theater, so wie es ist'.⁴ Jelinek, it has often been noted, does not write *for* but *against* the theatre.

It should perhaps be stated at the outset that many critics and reviewers have failed to see the humour in Elfriede Jelinek's writing, or have simply failed to respond to Jelinek's style of comedy. A *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* reviewer of *Totenaufer* is reported to have had a moment of revelation, reflecting, 'vielleicht müßten wir überhaupt Jelinek neu lesen, vielleicht ist das ja alles komisch gemeint', but as Bernard Banoun explains, wit and satirical intent are for the most part characteristics of *all* Jelinek's texts, and it is perhaps *because* they are always present that the aspect of comedy appears to have been somewhat neglected in popular as well as scholarly studies.⁵ 'Das liegt wohl auch daran,' Banoun proposes, 'daß die Aussage der Werke weit über Komik hinausführt, daß also Komik nur Mittel zum Zweck ist'.⁶

- 2 For the most recent bibliography, see Pia Janke, *Werkverzeichnis Elfriede Jelinek* (Vienna, 2004).
- 3 See 'Ich möchte seicht sein', *Theater heute Jahrbuch* (1983), p. 102, or 'Sinn egal. Körper zwecklos', at Jelinek's homepage: <http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/elfriede/> (14/ 07/2005), for example.
- 4 From the cover of *Krankheit oder moderne Frauen* (Cologne, 1987), a play chosen as a landmark drama by Ben Morgan. See 'Jelinek, *Krankheit oder moderne Frauen*', in *Landmarks in German Drama*, ed. by Peter Hutchinson (Oxford, Berne, etc, 2002), pp. 225–42.
- 5 The review is quoted in Bernard Banoun, 'Komik und Komödie in einigen Stücken Elfriede Jelineks', in *Komik in der österreichischen Literatur*, ed. by Wendelin Schmidt-Dengler, Johann Sonnleitner, Klaus Zeyringer (Berlin, 1996), pp. 285–99 (p. 285).
- 6 Ibid. In addition to the sources cited by Banoun, see also the short piece by Marie-Thérèse Kerschbaumer which attempts to categorise some of the formal devices employed by Jelinek: 'Bemerkungen zu Elfriede Jelineks *Burgtheater. Posse mit Gesang*', *Frischfleisch und Löwenmaul*, 39 (1983), 42–7.

Although first published in 1982, *Burgtheater* was not to have its première until 1983, and in Bonn,⁷ and although this production was invited to a number of major theatre festivals in the following year, the play was not staged again until May 2005, when it had its Austrian première. Before that there had been only two readings of the play in Austria, and a radio play version had been broadcast on Austrian public radio (ORF, Ö1) in 1991.⁸ Claus Peymann, otherwise something of a champion of Jelinek's work, at least from 1992 onwards,⁹ had praised *Burgtheater* when he was still working in Germany, but this praise had conspicuously disappeared by the time he was director of the Burgtheater (1986–99), when he felt that Jelinek's play was 'nicht qualitativ voll genug fürs Burgtheater'.¹⁰ Even though Peymann famously asked Thomas Bernhard to write a piece to commemorate fifty years since the 'Anschluß' (*Heldenplatz*) and was certainly not opposed to producing public debate, the correlation between the characters of Jelinek's play and the real lives of Austria's most famous family of actors – the Wessely-Hörbigers (Paula Wessely; Attila and Paul Hörbiger; and Attila and Paula's three daughters) – was clearly too obvious and the satire too vociferous for Peymann to countenance a production. Even when *Burgtheater* finally received its Austrian première, it was staged by Graz's Theater im Bahnhof (TiB), and not on the company's regular

- 7 *Burgtheater* was first published without the 'allegorische Zwischenspiel' in *manuskripte*, 22 (1982). Quotations here are from *Theaterstücke. Clara S., Was geschah, nachdem Nora ihren Mann verlassen hatte, Burgtheater* (Cologne, 1984).
- 8 Peter Roessler, 'Vom Bau der Schweigemauer' *TheaterZeitschrift*, 2 (1982), 85–91, examines the lack of reaction to the printed versions of Jelinek's play. Roessler notes that the original publication had been planned for *protokolle*, but that the publisher, Jugend und Volk, withdrew its support. The present essay follows on from my examination of the reception of the play as a *Schlüsselstück* ('Demythologising the Austrian "Heimat": Elfriede Jelinek as "Nestbeschmutzer"', in *From High Priests to Desecrators: Contemporary Austrian Literature*, ed. by Moray McGowan and Ricarda Schmidt (Sheffield, 1993), pp. 25–44). On this topic, see *Die Nestbeschmutzerin: Jelinek und Österreich*, ed. by Pia Janke and Students (Salzburg, 2004).
- 9 Jelinek received her first Viennese première under Peymann with *Totenauberg*.
- 10 Quoted in Margarete Lamb-Faffelberger, *Valie Export und Elfriede Jelinek im Spiegel der Presse: Zur Rezeption der feministischen Avantgarde Österreichs* (New York, 1992), p. 86, from a piece by Franz Endler in the *Arbeiter Zeitung*, 15 June 1987.

stage but in the city's 'Heimatsaal'.¹¹ One wonders whether it is the ultimate mark of international recognition (the Nobel prize) and the consequent public acknowledgement of Jelinek within Austria (sometimes from the most unlikely sources), or whether it is the death of Paula Wessely in 2000¹² that has been the most significant factor in paving the way for the first Austrian production of a play some twenty years after its German première.¹³

Burgtheater is one of only two of Jelinek's works that makes explicit reference to the comedic form in its subtitle. Many of her texts have straightforward genre descriptions: *Die Klavierspielerin* – 'Roman', *Das Lebewohl*, '3 kleine Dramen'; others have highly ironic descriptors such as *Gier*, 'Ein Unterhaltungsroman'. *Burgtheater* carries the description 'eine Posse mit Gesang', itself, of course, an ironic genre description, though the drama clearly plays with and alludes to elements of the Austrian traditions of the *Volksstück* and the *Zauberstück*, as exemplified by Nestroy and Raimund respectively. The other 'comedy' is *Raststätte oder Sie machens alle* (a highly sexualised *Così fan tutte* parody set in a motorway service station), simply designated 'eine Komödie'.¹⁴ Jelinek's texts can often be seen as working against a particular literary form or a

- 11 The venue was chosen deliberately to enhance the contrast between Jelinek's 'anti-Heimat' writing and the usual kind of events staged in such a venue. The hall, with its school assembly-style narrow platform also assisted the company to perform some meta-theatrical reflections on the nature of its own company's history. TiB's production foregrounded the process of mythologisation that goes on in actors' self-representations and in the process of institutionalisation of a theatre.
- 12 Jelinek's short dramatic monologue entitled 'Erlkönigin', in *Macht nichts. Eine kleine Trilogie des Todes* (Reinbek, 1999), published a year before Wessely's death, presents a monologue by a dead Burgtheater actress and can be seen as a kind of dramatic epilogue to *Burgtheater*.
- 13 The TiB used approximately a third to a half of the original text, and the rest was new material, a fact which came in for some criticism in the more negative reviews. This procedure, however, fully accords with Jelinek's principles: 'Jetzt hab ich es halt dem Theater im Bahnhof gegeben. Nicht nur, weil ich die sehr gut finde und ihnen zutraue, dass sie frei und auch möglichst anarchisch mit dem Text umgehen, sondern weil ich kein offizielles Theater dafür haben wollte' (Jelinek quoted in Mathias Grilj, 'Jelinek: Ihr *Burgtheater* zuerst im Grazer Bahnhof', here at: http://www.falter.at/print/STF2005_10.php (7/14/2005), originally in *Falter*, 9 (March 2005)).
- 14 *Raststätte oder Sie machens alle*, in *Stecken, Stab und Stangl, Raststätte oder Sie machens alle, Wolken. Heim: neue Theatertexte* (Reinbek, 1997).

particular mode of discourse, whether this be the *Liebesroman* or *Heimatroman* as in *Die Liebhaberinnen* (1975), pornography and erotic literature, as in *Lust* (1989), or politicians' rhetoric and behaviour, as in her lampoon of the charismatic, right-wing Austrian politician Jörg Haider in *Das Lebewohl* (2000).

If the writer nods to her Austrian literary antecedents in the subtitle and, indeed, in some of the many intertextual allusions and quotations in her play, it is certainly not her intention to ridicule these genres as such. She locates her own writing within a very Austrian tradition of satirical language awareness, acknowledging her respect and admiration for Nestroy,¹⁵ Karl Kraus, Ödon von Horváth, and the group of post-war writers and artists known as the *Wiener Gruppe*, amongst others. The effect of the full title of Jelinek's play is to create a deliberate friction between the Burgtheater, itself a cultural 'landmark' connoting Austrian classical, high culture, and a 'low comedy' genre, the 'Posse', which is, or perhaps more accurately *was*, more usually associated with the theatres of the 'Vorstadt'. As Gail Finney points out, the subtitle 'evokes associations with the nineteenth-century Viennese folk play and creates expectations of light fare',¹⁶ the latter being a description one would never apply to anything by this author.

Jelinek's ironic subtitle points towards some of the implied meaning of her play: that the Burgtheater and its history are, as it were, institutionally farcical. Her title deliberately omits a definite article, however – it is deliberately not 'das' Burgtheater. Thus the title also suggests associations not with the building or institution (*das* Burgtheater) and its actors, but with the sense of 'Theater' as 'fuss' (as in 'Mach doch kein Theater'), and 'Theater' as deception and duplicity ('Theater spielen', meaning

15 Jelinek pays homage to Nestroy with her short play *Präsident Abendwind*. See *Präsident Abendwind*, in *Anthropophagen im Abendwind: Vier Theatertexte nach Johann Nepomuk Nestroys Häuptling Abendwind oder Das greuliche Festmahl*, ed. by H. Wiesner (Berlin, 1988) (Texte aus dem Literaturhaus Berlin, 2), pp. 19–36.

16 Gail Finney, 'The Politics of Violence on the Comic Stage: Elfriede Jelinek's *Burtheater*' in *Thalia's Daughters: German Women Dramatists from the Eighteenth Century to the Present*, ed. by Susan L. Cocalis and Ferrel Rose (Tübingen, 1996), pp. 239–252 (p. 239). In the 2004/2005 season, the Burgtheater and its sister stage, the Akademietheater, staged two Nestroy plays as well as two Lessing plays.

'heucheln', or 'vortäuschen'). The duplicity to which Jelinek refers is that of actors and artists during the Third Reich, who willingly and enthusiastically participated in the most acute pieces of propagandistic Nazi art but then presented half-hearted excuses and apologies for this after the war. Her play, she has insisted, is not a *Schlüsselstück* pillorying a handful of specific people, but a play that is essentially about opportunism and about the susceptibility of artists to ideology. The actors in her play, then, are *pars pro toto*, standing for many more during this period, and indeed the issue of their real-life counterparts' inability to address properly their complicity and examine their own pasts functions as a specific exemplar of the phenomenon that Jelinek has made her life's obsession and the ultimate theme of much of her writing: *Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung*, and the uncovering of latent fascist structures in contemporary society. Thus, although she gives the two acts of her play a concrete location in time and place – Vienna in 1941 and 1945 respectively – her setting functions in the way of many a *Lehrstück* as a society at one remove, but from which lessons can be learned for the present.

The *dramatis personae* of *Burgtheater* are a family of actors, consisting of husband and wife Istvan and Käthe, the husband's brother Schorsch, a spinster sister of no independent means called Resi, who is obliged to serve as the family's maid, and the couple's three daughters. Two further characters appear: in the 'allegorische Zwischenspiel' an 'Alpenkönig', and a 'Burgtheaterzwerg' in the second act or 'part' of the play. The first part sees the actors having to come to terms with the new spirit of patriotism and nationalism which is being propagated by the Nazis and shows in particular Käthe's inability to speak the high German which is now required. Her brother-in-law Schorsch explains to her: 'Was i dir neilich scho sagen wollt, Kathi, mir missen unsane Rollen jetzn, vasteht, itzo a weng... ändern. Anpassn den verdänderten Zeitläuften. Dem Verlangen vom Hoamatl... staatspolitisch besonders wertvoll!' (p. 104). Käthe remains oblivious to Schorsch's message that she ought not to be constantly singing the praises of Austria and things Austrian, and is reprimanded by him in a tone which is charged with irony since it is clear that he too has not mastered the 'Schriftdeutsch' which they are required to speak. There is a comedy of clashing registers as Schorsch tries to employ the new vocabulary ('Donaugaue') but maintains his thick Viennese accent ('Großdaitschlond'):

SCHORSCH. Ich hob dir vorhin scho ernsthoft gesokt, Katherl, daß des net ollweil so weitergeht mitn Semmering und die Alpen und die Liadln. Man kann jo nicht immer lochen, net wohr. Der Ernst der Stunde verlangt gebieterisch noch einem in Großdaitschlond ollgemein verständlichen Schriftdaitsch, Alpen- und Donaugau fiegen sich. Ein neuer Erdenbürger! Willkommen! (p. 105)

Such deliberate mixing of registers is a common comic device in Jelinek's writings, and examples abound in *Burgtheater*. The writer deploys the comedy of incongruity by inserting vocabulary that is deliberately inappropriate or unlikely in the circumstances: 'Mir hom glaubt, du seist neilich erscht *liquidiert* wurn', Käthe comments to her brother-in-law, using the Nazi or militaristic language of death (p. 142, my emphasis).

In the 'Allegorische Zwischenspiel' at the end of the play's first part, the 'Alpenkönig', a member of the Austrian resistance movement, comes down in his 'Märchenkahn' to ask for a contribution from the family. The actors are incensed and tear the 'Alpenkönig' apart on stage, leaving behind a pile of limbs and pools of blood. By the end of the war, in the second part of the play, Käthe has progressed from her earlier praise of 'Österreichertum' (p. 105) to a stage of national and ideological, if not linguistic, assimilation. She now speaks of 'Uns Daitschen' (p. 131), and with the impending liberation of Vienna, Käthe fears what will become of the family under the Russians. The 'Burgtheaterzwerg', who has been given secret refuge by the maid, Resi, and moved about from hiding place to hiding place in order to avoid discovery and inevitable extermination by the Nazis, is finally uncovered by the family. The dwarf realises his power over the actors and demands the hand of Käthe's daughter Mitzi as a bribe for his silence. As soon as she sets eyes on him, Mitzi refuses the dwarf for whom she had donned her nice dress, and the – admittedly very vague – nod to the possibility of a conciliatory, traditional happy ending, complete with liberation and wedding so beloved of the comic mode, is thereby swiftly removed. Moreover, the brother (Schorsch) arrives back from a short stay in prison, declaring that he has managed to get himself photographed writing out a cheque for the patriotic Austrian resistance movement and that their 'alibi' is now secured and the 'dwarf option' unnecessary. Käthe is not to be consoled, however, as her beloved Burgtheater will now be occupied by the Russians! After a number of comically feeble and unsuccessful suicide

attempts (and after attempting to set her own daughter on fire), she finally manages to stab herself with a pair of scissors and lies bleeding to death throughout the closing dialogue (and monologue) of the play, protesting in a mixture of defeat and ludicrous defiance:

KÄTHE. *richtet sich plötzlich auf, verletzt, stöhnt undeutlich:* Es ist mir schon wieder nicht gelungen. Derweil hat der Russe mein Burgteatta bezwungen. Er richtet sich dorten häuslich ein. Nein! [...] Haltets eahm auf! Ringsum schlagen nämlich Millionen deutsche Herzen. *gurgelnd.*¹⁷

Some of the comic effect here stems from the levity of the self-commentary ('es ist mir schon wieder nicht gelungen') in the face of what might normally be deemed a more fitting act for a tragedy – suicide. The sheer multiplication of Käthe's attempts, coupled with the scant regard afforded her by the other characters, gives this self-violence a farcical feeling to it. There are plenty of other moments of violent horseplay, physicality and the grotesque in the play, giving it a slapstick quality or the air of a 'Grand-Guignol', as commentators have observed.¹⁸ The opening scene takes the public right into the private, domestic sphere as the daughters' dinner is served. The stage directions tell us that Käthe '*hebt eine Terrine mit Schinkenfleckerl hoch und schüttet das Ganze mitten auf dem Tisch zu einem Haufen auf. Die Kinder kraxeln sofort halb den Tisch hinauf, versuchen, etwas davon aufzufangen, essen mit dem Kopf auf der Tischplatte, wie die Schweine. Furchtbare Patzerei!*' (p. 103).

Again, normal expectations are flouted here, in the action itself (the disgusting manner in which dinner is served), as well as in the language and in the incongruous reactions of the characters. Käthe reacts '*applaudierend*': 'Sans net siaß meine Bauxerln? Gleich trägt die Resi die Nockerln auf. Schön schnabulieren, gelts ja! Und wenn es nur fürs Hoamatl is, das bald hungern und frieren wird' (p. 103). The theme of eating is a useful one for an author to use in suggesting a discrepancy

17 'Ringsum schlagen Millionen deutsche Herzen' is one of the many adapted or verbatim quotations from Paula Wessely's famous speech in *Heimkehr*. It is difficult to obtain a copy of the film, but this extract can be downloaded from Jelinek's homepage (see fn. 3).

18 See Hubert Lengauer on *Burgtheater* in the *Volksstück* tradition: 'Jenseits vom Volk: Elfriede Jelineks "Posse mit Gesang"', in *Das zeitgenössische deutschsprachige Volksstück*, ed. by Ursula Hassel and Herbert Herzmann (Tübingen, 1992), pp. 217–28.

between the outer respectability or public attitudes of certain characters and their true, inner behaviour or aspirations. Banoun reminds us of Brecht's *Kleinbürgerhochzeit* and how the moment of eating provides an opportunity of showing 'die private Sphäre [...] vor allem in der Darstellung ausgesprochen vulgärer Eßsitten'.¹⁹ Finney points out that from the moment the curtain opens with this dinner-time parody, Jelinek's comedy also sets out to demythologise the idealised image of motherhood so beloved of fascist ideology.

The most grotesque example of physical violence in Jelinek's satire comes in the allegorical interlude, when the 'Alpenkönig' descends to the sound of harp music in his 'Märchenkahn, Gondel o. ä. Paradiesisches Gefährt' (the latter term already suggesting the tokenism of Jelinek's allusion to Raimund), wrapped up like a mummy in white bandages but with patches of blood already on him. The actors are suspicious and fearful of him and ignore his explanation that he is a member of the Austrian resistance and is collecting money.

SCHORSCH. Seind Sie vielleicht die rote Pest? Ui jegerl!

ISTVAN. Seind Sie vielleicht die Fratze des Bolschewismus? Ui jegerl [...]

SCHORSCH. Seind Sie der Vertreter des Weltjudentums? Mir kaufen nix!

ALPENKÖNIG. Hier bin ich nur Österreicher, hier darf ichs sein

[...]

ISTVAN. Lumpenhund! Vaterlandsverräter!

KÄTHE *singt*. Brüderlein fein, Brüderlein fein, einmal muß geschieden sein! *sie wirft sich gegen den Alpenkönig, der fällt gegen seinen Kahn, beides taumelt, wankt, kracht.*

[...]

ALPENKÖNIG *ächzend*. Ich bin die Nachgeborenen! Ich bin die Jugend! Ich bin das hohe Alter! Ich bin Österreich! Ich bin die Zukunft!

Istvan und Käthe schlagen ernsthaft und immer heftiger auf den Alpenkönig ein, der beginnt jetzt, Körperteile zu verstreuen um sich her. Kleidungsstücke lösen sich von ihm. Ein Arm löst sich jetzt. Teile seines Gesichts ebenfalls [...].

ISTVAN *hält kurz inne, schwer atmend*. Ui jegerl, is des a Hetz!

SCHORSCH *keucht*. A Hetz muaß sein! So glocht hamma nimma seit dem Anschluß! [...] So gschrian homma nimma seit dem Heldenplotz. (pp. 115–16)

Banoun rightly concludes that the simultaneous presence of laughter and violence acts as a check to the audience's laughter so that there is always a built-in alienation in Jelinek's texts. Brecht himself acknowledged that

19 'Komik und Komödie in einigen Stücken Elfriede Jelineks', p. 290.

the *Verfremdungseffekt* was itself a time-honoured practice in comedy.²⁰ Bergson identifies as a symptom of laughter, 'the *absence of feeling* which usually accompanies laughter'. 'Indifference', he says, 'is its natural environment, for laughter has no greater foe than emotion'.²¹ As well as the alienation which might be inherent in comedy and to which Jelinek aspires throughout her writing, not just in the comic moments, there is in *Burgtheater* what might be called the cumulative effect of so much buffoonery, intertextual allusion, punning, slapstick action and grotesquery. As Banoun puts it: 'obwohl all diese Mittel auf eine Tradition der Komik zurückgeführt werden können, besteht bei Jelinek das Problem, daß durch Anhäufung und Übertreibung die komische Wirkung der Elemente ins Gegenteil verkehrt wird'.²² *Burgtheater* might then be read as anti-comedy.

As is apparent, then, in the lengthy quotation above, Jelinek would appear to be making literal or 'performing' a kind of deconstructionist view of language or text as 'a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture'.²³ In his theory of the comic, Brian Edwards emphasises the 'ambivalence of language'. Using a deconstructionist understanding of language, he observes that 'the rhetorical play is never done. Truth is destabilized by the duplicities of language and not only is a text always already "a tissue of quotations", conscious and unconscious on the part of its author, but the "I" who approaches the text, the reader, is as Barthes says "a plurality of other texts, of codes which are infi-

- 20 Verna A. Foster, *The Name and Nature of Tragicomedy* (Aldershot, 2004) reminds us of this (p. 160). See Bertolt Brecht, 'Erster Nachtrag zur Theorie des Messingkaufs', *Werke. Große kommentierte Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe* (Berlin, 1988ff.), Vol. 22, p. 699.
- 21 *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, transl. by C. Brereton and F. Rothwell (London, 1911), p. 4.
- 22 'Komik und Komödie in einigen Stücken Elfriede Jelineks', p. 291. Critics have often observed the potentially counter-effective nature of Jelinek's aesthetics. This complaint seems most pertinent with reference to Einar Schleef's production of *Ein Sportstück*. See Gita Honegger, 'Beyond Berlin, Beyond Brecht: Offenbach, Horváth, Jelinek, and their Directors', *Theater*, 29 (1999), 4–25 (15).
- 23 Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in *Image, Music, Text*, transl. by Stephen Heath (New York, 1977), p. 148, quoted by Brian Edwards, 'Verbum Ludens, or The Antic Disposition of Words: Towards a Theory of the Comic', in *Comic Relations: Studies in the Comic, Satire and Parody*, ed. by Pavel Peter (Frankfurt a. M., 1985), pp. 43–50 (p. 45).

nite'''²⁴ The plurality or polyphony of texts and intertextual allusions encompasses a wide spectrum in Jelinek, from Goethe and Schiller to popular folk songs, Viennese operetta songs, film titles and plots, gestic quotations to actors like Hans Moser or Anni Rosar. Some of Jelinek's montage is allowed to stand in the original whereas other passages are adapted or parodied to comic effect. The above passage includes, for example, quotations from Raimund's *Der Bauer als Millionär* ('Ich bin das hohe Alter!', 'Brüderlein fein, Brüderlein fein', etc), as well as from Goethe's *Faust* ('Hier bin ich nur Mensch [Österreicher], hier darf ichs sein'), though the Alpenzweig is most certainly not allowed simply to be a man or to protest his Austrian credentials, since he is beaten to death by Käthe, Schorsch and Istvan.²⁵ One of the major intertexts of Jelinek's comedy is the Nazi propaganda film *Heimkehr* (Georg Ucicky, 1941) in which Paula Wessely played the starring role, and *Burgtheater* contains numerous quotations and parodies of a highly emotionally charged rallying speech made by Wessely's character, a persecuted German in Poland.

There are varying degrees of receptiveness and recognition that different audience members or readers will bring to bear when watching or reading this play. The audience might not recognise the allusions to *Heimkehr* or be familiar with the exact source, but they will surely discern the imported register, and the theatre-going public will recognise some of the many comic jibes at Paula Wessely's own biography. The classical intertext which is alluded to most prominently in *Burgtheater* is Grillparzer's *König Ottokars Glück und Ende*, a play with canonical status in Austria which has been studied by generations of school pupils. It was also the play chosen to reopen the Burgtheater in 1955. Jelinek's sometimes scatological, sometimes brilliantly allusive re-writing of some of the most famous speeches and evocations of Austria's honesty and loyalty are calculated to have a provocative, iconoclastic effect. George

24 Brian Edwards, 'Verbum Ludens', p. 45. Edwards is quoting from Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, transl. by Richard Miller (London, 1975), p. 10.

25 John Pizer writes persuasively of the difference between Karl Kraus's and Elfriede Jelinek's use of the classics for satirical effect, particularly with regard to Goethe ('Modern vs Postmodern Satire', *Monatshefte*, 86 (1994), 500–12). Finney ('The Politics of Violence on the Comic Stage') makes it clear that in parodying Goethe and Schiller, Jelinek also aims to denounce the separation of art and politics that is 'nowhere better represented in the German tradition than in Weimar classicism' (loc. cit., p. 247).

Reinhardt describes Jelinek's technique as a process of 'reverse metamorphosis' whereby 'the butterfly is transformed back into the caterpillar. Grillparzer's elegant formulations acquire a sexual, excremental, or more menacing note'.²⁶ The following extract illustrates Jelinek's appropriation of Ottokar von Hornek's hymn of praise to Austria:

SCHORSCH. Allein was nottut und was Klotz gefällt.
 ISTVAN. Der klare Blick, der offne richt'ge Zugewinn.
 SCHORSCH. Da seicht der Österreicher hin vor Samojeden.
 ISTVAN. Denkt sich sein Teil und läßt den Großsulz reden!
 SCHORSCH. O gutes Gland, o Vaterland!
 ISTVAN. Verrottend zwischenem Kind Italien und dem Spengler NACKTBRAND
 SCHORSCH. liegst du, der wangenrote KLÜNGLING da:
 ISTVAN. Erhalte Gott dir deinen LUDERSINN.
 SCHORSCH. Und eingriffe gut, was andre versargen! (pp. 125–26)²⁷

The lines are delivered alternately by Schorsch and Istvan and the stichomythia underscores Jelinek's wit. The comedy here draws on clever re-wordings that maintain the rhyme scheme and are close to the original in metre, but although the characters seem to be competing in an exchange of verbal dexterity in an almost Wildean fashion, the reader is not enlisted into the comedy by her characters. We do not marvel at a stylised, 'spontaneous' banter. The comedy is too black for this, and the pleasure of sharing in the playwright's wit is not gratuitous as we are steered away from the linguistic *tour de force* towards the political messages of Jelinek's parody. 'The poetic description of Austria's geographical location is altered', Reinhardt explains, 'so it alludes ominously

- 26 Reinhardt offers an accomplished reading of Jelinek's Grillparzer parody in 'Elfriede Jelinek's *Burgtheater*: Language as Exorcism', in *Playing for Stakes: German-language Drama in Social Context: Essays in Honor of Herbert Lederer*, ed. by Anna K. Kuhn and Barbara D. Wright (Oxford, 1994), pp. 225–47.
- 27 A comparison with Grillparzer's *König Ottokar* (1825) makes the extent of Jelinek's cruel parody clear: 'Allein, was nottut und was Gott gefällt, / Der klare Blick, der offne, richtge Sinn, / Da tritt der Österreicher hin vor jeden, / Denkt sich sein Teil, und läßt die andern reden! / O gutes Land! o Vaterland! Inmitten / Dem Kind Italien und dem Manne Deutschland, / Liegst du, der wangenrote Jüngling, da:/ Erhalte Gott dir deinen Jugendsinn, / Und mache gut, was andere verdarben!' (Grillparzer, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. by Peter Frank and Karl Pörnbacher (Munich, 1960–64), Vol. 2, p. 1037 (ll. 1695–1703).

to moral depravity and cremation in the death camps: "Verrottend zwischenem Kind Italien und dem Spengler NACKTBRAND" (p. 235).

For the foreign, or perhaps more accurately. non-Austrian audience (this is arguably not an easy play even for non-Austrian German-speakers to understand), it is not only the potential lack of familiarity with Austria's 'Kulturgut' that might impede understanding. The sheer complexity of the *mock*-Viennese dialect in which it is written is also a major factor. The treatment of language in Jelinek's play is of paramount importance, and one of the main sources of comedy. The playwright's intentions are emphasised in the directions which precede the seemingly nonsensical final 'chorus' of the play: 'es muß so gesprochen werden, daß es ausgesprochen sinnvoll klingt, mit Betonungen und allem' (p. 149), and in the explicit instructions which precede the play itself:

Sehr wichtig ist die Behandlung der Sprache, sie ist als eine Art Kunstsprache zu verstehen. Nur Anklänge an den echten Wiener Dialekt! Alles wird genauso gesprochen, wie es geschrieben ist. Es ist sogar wünschenswert, wenn ein deutscher Schauspieler den Text wie einen fremdsprachigen Text lernt und spricht. (p. 102)

The discordance between theatrical components – here the accent deployed and the deliberately inauthentic delivery – is part of Jelinek's brand of alienation technique. Her intentions here also call to mind (although with a slightly different twist) the retrospective 'Gebrauchsanweisung' that Ödon von Horváth wrote for his *Geschichten aus dem Wienerwald*, having been disappointed with the production and misinterpretation of his play. 'Es darf kein Wort Dialekt gesprochen werden!', he cautioned, 'Jedes Wort muß hochdeutsch gesprochen werden, allerdings so, wie jemand, der sonst nur Dialekt spricht und sich nun zwingt, hochdeutsch zu reden. Sehr wichtig! Denn es gibt schon jedem Wort dadurch die Synthese zwischen Realismus und Ironie. Komik des Unterbewußten'.²⁸

If we take the final speech (or '*Wortsymphonie*' as it is described in the stage directions, p. 149), spoken by all of the characters alternately, then the sense of a subconscious reality, a comic, Freudian slippage or parapraxis is very evident. The noise and confusion of the action and

28 *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. by T. Krischke and D. Hildebrandt (Frankfurt a. M., 1971), Vol. 4, pp. 659–65 (p. 663).

dialogue gradually become focused into a litany of Austrian names, short phrases and symbols chanted by the characters, as Käthe bleeds to death. Interspersed with very few, undistorted and instantly recognisable, 'correct' items ('Das Kaffeehaus', 'Die Philharmoniker'), there are many more new coinages, some of them mildly negatively tainted ('Das Kaffeetscherl mit Hudelzupf' or 'Edelschweiß!'), and others where the sense of a fascist subconscious breaking through is made more blatant. The characters mouth both distorted evocations of traditional culture and history: 'Der Grillkarzer', 'Die Hofwürg', 'Das Salzkammerblut', 'Die Saubertöte', 'Das Haus Habswürg', and coinages from more recent political history which, by implication, are seen as being as prototypically Austrian as the previous list. These are, for example, 'Das Judensternndl', 'Das Musikkazett', 'Die Vergaserin', 'Ringstraßenmorderie'. The subconscious, we are invited to think, slips through, creating humour and spoiling the naïve, apolitical myth of Austrianness in this liturgical parody or mock thanksgiving to Austria. And the play then ends with a dance and a round of 'Griß enk Gott alle miteinander, alle miteinander', a famous operetta number from Carl Zeller's *Der Vogelhändler*. The staccato rhythm of this final speech and the sense of linguistic degeneration, particularly evident in the Käthe character, finds an echo in much of Jelinek's writing, including her recent short play, *Das Lebewohl* (*Les Adieux*), where the Haideresque speaker figure finally regresses into a kind of monomaniac yet juvenile paranoia. Although it is true that Käthe's language degenerates more and more and may be brought on by the physical pain she inflicts on herself, it surely has less to do with realism than with a comic inference about the 'madness' of the character's sense of reality, her naïve, sponge-like absorption of rhetoric and propaganda as well as folk song, lines from dramas, and plots from films. Moreover, in Jelinek's negative aesthetics, language becomes denuded of sense, and any sense of humanity is squeezed out of it.²⁹

At the same time as the actor-characters regurgitate Nazi ideology and enthusiastically embrace the new Nazi era ('So glocht hamma nimma seit dem Anschluß! [...] So gschrian homma nimma seit dem Heldenplotz', p. 116), they also trot out the usual commonplaces about the actor

29 Ute Nyssen notes this in her 'Nachwort' to Jelinek, *Krankheit oder moderne Frauen*, pp. 84–93 (p. 88). See also Nyssen's analysis of the ending of *Krankheit*, where the language becomes a 'Mélange aus Faschismus und Goethe'.

and his lowly, unpretentious, apolitical status ('Bin nur ein Komödiant!', p. 103), and the profession as a kind of calling ('Spielen, spielen ist ja mein Leben!', p. 104). There are one or two moments in the play where a kind of 'Herr-Karl' effect might occur, that is to say, where the satirical intent is in danger of backfiring. Qualtinger's great monologue and examination of the 'kleiner Mann' of post-war Vienna, shows what his memories reveal about his unthinking acceptance and small-scale complicity in some of the shadier chapters of Austria's past, glossing it all in a certain nostalgic memory of 'having a bit of a laugh'. When Schorsch notes in the 1941 part that 'in unsarem nächsten Film derf der tepperte Praiß net schon wieder der Teppate sein!' (p. 121), his statement reveals that the 'Praiß' will still *be* stupid, it's just that for political reasons they should not show him in this vein. In this example, however, the Austrian laughs *with* the actor and the sentiment cannot help but reaffirm and celebrate the general Austrian distrust and disaffection for the Germans (even if this is certainly not what Jelinek wanted to reinforce).³⁰ A sense of complicity is a necessary premise for laughter to occur, however, as Bergson points out: 'however spontaneous it seems, laughter always implies a kind of secret freemasonry, or even complicity, with other laughers, real or imaginary'.³¹ The laughter in Jelinek is never cathartic or without political implication, and when Käthe describes her accomplishments in making the audience laugh, the effect produced is a moment of uncomfortable recognition, a kind of comedic *mise en abyme*: 'An Gspäß hob i jetzt gmocht! Und wie das Pulikum locht! Es jauchzt und tjachzt! Es juchazt und lefzt! Es seimt und schleimt! Es gigazt und Werner Krauss!' (p. 112). Jelinek holds a mirror up to her audience – as 'laughers' we are forced to see ourselves as these bestial creatures. Additionally, the humour is turned into disgust as we surely associate the catachresis, 'Werner Krauss', with this actor's role in the film *Jud süß* (directed by Veit Harlan, 1940).

'A witty nation is, of necessity, a nation enamoured of the theatre', Bergson remarks in his observations on wit as a '*dramatic* way of think-

30 Leslie Bodi reminds us of a tradition of stereotyped German or 'Prussian' characters in Austrian literature, citing examples in Nestroy, Hofmannsthal, Musil, and Horvath. (Leslie Bodi, 'Comic Ambivalence as an Identity Marker: the Austrian Model', in Pavel Petr (ed.), *Comic Relations*, pp. 67–78 (pp. 71–2)).

31 *Laughter*, p. 6.

ing'.³² That Austria is a nation enamoured of the theatre and all its trappings is categorically the case. The importance of Austrian writers' and thinkers' contributions to language scepticism, language satire and wit are also beyond question. By setting out to debunk *Komödiantentum* in *Burgtheater*, Jelinek is chipping away at a core image or self-image of Austria as a light-hearted, fun-loving, apolitical and immutably natural and uncomplicated people ('Mir san mir! Und wia ma sa so samma', p. 131). As far as the implications for modern, or perhaps post-modern, comedy are concerned, what Jelinek does in this landmark text is partly to ask questions of the genre and to put comedic traditions to new and unexpected uses. Much more fundamentally, she also sets out to undermine a kind of Austrian comedic licence or neutrality – a permission to laugh it all off, to reduce even the most sinister episodes in history to an unfortunate gag – after all, 'A Hetz muaß sein!' (p. 146). As we know, 'Hetz' is an Austrian word for a laugh or a bit of fun, but it derives from a verb whose meanings include to 'hound' or 'persecute', or to 'dash around'. It is very much the double connotation of this word with which we are left by Jelinek's comedy.

32 *Laughter*, p. 105 (emphasis in original).