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Max Reinhardt Ended An Epoch

FOR various reasons—space, nationality, and other events of the time that were bigger news—the death of Max Reinhardt two months ago got three lines in the cables. But it did not pass unnoticed everywhere. Here is a tribute written by Joseph Chapiro for the New York "Nation."

THE death of Max Reinhardt marks the passing not only of a great *metteur en scène* but an epoch without doubt the most brilliant in the history of the modern theatre, which for half a century was filled with his name. It was the epoch inaugurated in Paris about 1890 by Antoine, continued and extended by Stanislavsky's Moscow Art Theatre, and brought to its culmination in Berlin by Max Reinhardt, who became—in Stanislavsky's words—its most glorious and complete expression.

Reinhardt was born September 9, 1873, in Baden, near Vienna. He never became a German citizen; yet since he spent almost forty years of his active life in Berlin it is no more than proper to regard him as a German artist. In effect it was he who revived the German classics and rescued them from the philologists who had kept them locked up in their dusty Germanic seminars like insects carefully fastened down with pins in laboratories. And it was

he who made the German language sound from all the great stages of the world.

Yes, he was a German artist, but he recognised no frontiers. Just as he brought the German theatre, both classic and modern, to foreign audiences, so he was indefatigable in introducing foreign authors into Germany. He restored the entire Shakespearean repertory, giving almost 3,000 performances in a quarter of a century. He modernised the Spanish classics, brought back the *Commedia dell'Arte*, and revived the French classics in German. During the retreat of the German army, eleven days before the armistice, when chauvinism was at its height, he proclaimed the freedom of the spirit by putting on a performance of Racine's "Phedre."

Moreover, he constantly sought out every contemporary manifestation of the human spirit, transforming his stage into a living mirror reflecting the problems tormenting the minds and hearts of all peoples. And this man who came from a poor Jewish family, this man who never had any systematic education, raised himself so high by the strength of his own genius that he was able to dominate all social strata. He portrayed all types and illustrated their joy and suffering, their aspirations and despair, with thrilling precision.

His sense for literary values was as extraordinary as his flair for actors. He discovered writers and actors before they themselves knew their vocation. At the same time he suggested to playwrights—scenes and acts, if not whole plays. He offered leading roles to people who had never been in the wings and who, from one day to the next, became famous actors.

But Reinhardt's great originality, the essence of his work, lay in his *mises en scène*. What did Reinhardt understand by the *mise en scène*? There are those who believe the secret of his magical virtuosity consisted in his arrangement of the stage, in decor and costume. They wonder why the name and fame of this artist who concealed himself behind the stage curtain surpassed that of the greatest actors. The truth is that all his ingenious stage machinery served him also as a means whereby the stage could be forgotten. What mattered to him was making the connection between the actor and the audience, between the dream and the reality.

All of which explains his tireless search for the technical improvements that other *metteurs en scène* subsequently adopted without, however, succeeding in using them with Reinhardt's mastery. He began with the footlights, which light the face from below upward, in distinction to nature, which casts its light downwards. Moreover, each hour of the day has its specific kind of light, as each kind of light has its own colour, the tones of which change with the passing minutes. So he created gamuts of colour hitherto unknown to the theatre. Like a great painter extracting inimitable colours from his palette, he mixed them in the air until his projectors yielded the natural light that would give the audience the feeling of noon or of a particular hour of a sunny or gloomy day.

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