

**“SHALL WE BE TOLERANT OF INTOLERANCE?”  
THE RECEPTION OF LESSING’S *NATHAN THE WISE*  
IN AMERICAN EXILE**

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This paper departs from the assumption that no other drama disposes of such a broad, international, and symbolically charged interpretation history as *Nathan the Wise* (1779). While the play was censored in Nazi Germany, European (and often Jewish) authors, who had sought refuge in the United States, brought *Nathan* along to perpetuate Lessing’s plea for religious tolerance. In this transatlantic adaptation process, however, the authors chose to adjust the original text to the cultural as well as societal and political conditions both in their old and new homeland(s). Could *Nathan* stand up to these new challenges?

**Keywords:** Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Nathan the Wise*, play adaptation, immigrants

Not only people but also texts migrate. One of those travelling texts is the 18<sup>th</sup> century play *Nathan the Wise* (1779) by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, a key figure of the German Enlightenment movement. This paper departs from the assumption that no other drama disposes of such a broad, international, and symbolically charged interpretation history as Lessing’s plea for religious tolerance.<sup>1</sup> Its reception in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century shows that peaks in number of performances were regularly reached during times of crisis. Thus, it comes

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<sup>1</sup> For the Jewish-German reception see specifically B. Fischer, *Nathans Ende? Von Lessing bis Tabori. Zur deutsch-jüdischen Rezeption von ‘Nathan der Weise’*, Göttingen 2000. For the reception by Jewish immigrants and exiles in the United States see K.-M. Kocyba, *Nathan auf Reisen. Stationen einer transatlantischen Rezeptionsgeschichte*, Dresden (forthcoming). As one detailed example see K.-M. Hinneburg (i.e. Kocyba): ‘Turn the earth into Eden again.’ Melchior Lengyels ‘Nathan the Wise’ als dramatische Anthropoziee in Andrea Benedek among others,

as no surprise that after 9/11, the play was not only staged over and over again but also heatedly discussed by theater critics as well as literary scholars and colleagues from other disciplines such as intellectual history and religious studies.<sup>2</sup> If we choose the Second World War as a particular phase of the Age of Totalitarianism, the exilic reception of *Nathan the Wise* evolves as a transnational paradigm. Be it Shanghai or Buenos Aires, Stockholm or New York – exiles and immigrants adapted the play to new contexts and had it staged as a response to the war. Why those artists chose to do so seems a question too easily answered; of course, the religious anti-Semitism displayed in the text can effortlessly be compared with the contemporary racist persecution of Jews. But to what extent can the parable of the rings truly be considered a helpful answer to real conflicts? This question is indebted to the skeptical reception of the New York performance in 1942: Why should you ask for peace after Pearl Harbor? Or, put differently: “Shall we be tolerant of intolerance?”<sup>3</sup>

In contrast to several other works, the adaptation by émigré Ferdinand Bruckner was neither buried in the files nor staged by an insignificant layman theater. After his successful career as a theater director and dramatist in Berlin, Bruckner already decided to leave Germany in 1933. After short stays in Switzerland and France, he finally immigrated to the United States in 1936. Since his effort to work as a screenwriter in Hollywood failed, he settled down in New York City where he worked together with Erwin Piscator. Similarly to Bruckner, Piscator had left his career as an avant-garde director behind to seek political refuge in the United States. Thanks to private recommendations, he was introduced to Dr. Alvin Johnson, director of the New York based New School for Social Research where Piscator was offered to found the Dramatic Workshop including an in-house Studio Theatre. On March 11, 1942 the curtain was lifted to introduce *Nathan the Wise* to the American stage.

Piscator’s reputation as a modern director was based on his notion of a ‘political theater’;<sup>4</sup> a theory also inspired by communist thoughts. With regard to content, his stage works (including the daring reinterpretation of the German classic *The Robbers* by Schiller) provide the foundation for a director’s theater: very individual, often unfaithful to tradition, and politically engaged. Being the director of the Dramatic Workshop, Piscator seldom found time to direct plays

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ed, *Interkulturelle Erkundungen. Lesen, Schreiben und Lernen in zwei Kulturen*, Teil 1, Frankfurt am Main 2012, pp. 449–458.

<sup>2</sup> Karl S. Guthke, Avishai Margalit and Karl-Josef Kuschel to name but a few.

<sup>3</sup> *New York Daily News*, April 4, 1942.

<sup>4</sup> E. Piscator, *Das politische Theater*, Berlin 1929.

himself; which was also the case with Bruckner’s *Nathan the Wise*. Instead, James Light, former member of the Provincetown Players, was appointed to the job. We can still assume that Piscator was in charge of the production and thus had the final say. Nevertheless, the New York audience witnessed a rather traditional performance: The setting was plain and simple. There were no projections or movie footages to allude to the present time, nor was the stage designed to confront the audience more directly. It seems the producer had full confidence in the text itself.

However, Piscator put a great deal of effort into the promotion of the play. It is here where he sets the guidelines for his interpretation: “Lessing wrote *Nathan the Wise* in 1779, a protest against intolerance, a plea for the equality of religions and races. It is astonishing to us that such a play should come from a country which is now so reactionary, so barbarian”.<sup>5</sup> Piscator opens the interpretation in two directions: First, as a comparison with the original from the 18<sup>th</sup> century; second, as a comparison with contemporary Nazi Germany. He makes clear that Lessing must be considered a representative of an allegedly ‘better Germany’; a term widely used among exiled artists: “[I]t is even more astonishing that this country was once the fatherland of modern humanistic science and art, the fatherland of Lessing, of Kant, of Goethe.” While Germany had fallen prey to fascism, exiles such as Piscator felt obliged to preserve the national cultural heritage, including Enlightenment values such as the right of critical scrutiny. Referring to Lessing’s well-known quote from the *Duplik*,<sup>6</sup> Piscator argues: “In America today, the conditions essential to that ‘honest effort to reach the truth’ still exist.” Thus, it is not only the content of the play but also the opportunity to stage it which renders the performance an enlightened quality.

Let us now turn to the adaptation. Piscator introduced the play as a piece of art providing proof of Germany’s moral integrity. While Lessing’s message stands in sharp contrast to Nazi ideology, according to Piscator, it can be aligned with the American “spirit of scientific humanism”. But the changes Bruckner made in his text are somehow not consistent with Piscator’s intent. While the latter applauds the United States’ military operation (“conditions...being defended on all fronts with planes and guns”), Bruckner has his dramatis personae stand up against war. This change can be demonstrated by means of two examples: Rahel,

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<sup>5</sup> Information booklet courtesy of Arbeitsstelle für Lessing-Rezeption, Kamenz.

<sup>6</sup> G.E. Lessing, Eine Duplik in H.G. Göpfert among others, ed, *Werke*, Vol. 8, Theologiekritische Schriften III / Philosophische Schriften, Munich 1979, pp. 30–101.

who is willing to marry the Templar provided that he gives up fighting;<sup>7</sup> and Nathan, who persuades the Sultan to lay down his weapons and secure peace between Muslims and Christians. For the sake of brevity, I restrict to the latter example only.

In contrast to the original play, Bruckner's Nathan is called to Sultan Saladin not to argue about the true religion but reasons to enter war:

**Saladin**

I must know. Entrusted with  
My people's [fate] *life* I have to find the best  
For them. This is a [crucial] *fateful* moment.  
The Templars, in a fit of madness have  
Betrayed the armistice I signed with  
The Christian kings. They now implore me  
to renew it, but I could use  
The breach and start a new campaign. [...] <sup>8</sup>

Saladin's motivation is clear: The (historically documented) breach of peace could be taken as an opportunity to avenge the crusaders. While Lessing mentions the breach only to make the peaceful encounter between the representatives of the three faiths more plausible, Bruckner puts it at the center of the drama, i.e. the parable of the three rings. The "secret powers of the ring", however, should take effect rather on political foes than religious competitors:

**Saladin**

Why then do we so hate our fellows?

**Nathan** (Simply)

For better air, for better place to catch  
The sun, another ray or two [...].

Placed in this new context, the parable reads as follow: Those who cherish the secret powers of the ring – "humility, forbearance, tolerance, and love"– are respected by their fellow men; attacks become unnecessary. Accordingly, the Sultan decides against revenge:

<sup>7</sup> In the adaptation, Lessing's symbolic yet confusing family bonds were detangled: Rahel and the Templar are not secret siblings; instead, they fall in love and eventually become a couple.

<sup>8</sup> F. Bruckner, *Nathan the Wise*, Erwin-Piscator-Center der Stiftung Archiv Akademie der Künste, Berlin Brandenburg, 265. Square brackets signal deletions, italics handwritten amendments. The adaptation will be published in *Wissenschaftlichen Ausgabe der Werke, Briefe und Tagebücher Ferdinand Bruckners* (Vol. 6, Schauspiele. Bearbeitungen und Übersetzungen), edited by Joaquín Moreno et al.

**Nathan** (After a pause freeing himself)

[...] Could you

But be the wiser judge!

**Saladin** (Laughing)

Stupid warrior

That I am? O no.

**Nathan**

At every dawn, as Sultan and victorious

Warrior you have to be the wiser judge.

Right now you must decide on armistice

Or not.

**Saladin** (Smiling)

I have already. Why should I punish

With the death of thousands a childish charge

By some fanatic Templars? Who knows

If in their place I had not done the same?

**Nathan**

He is the wisest judge who sets himself

On the defendant’s bench.

Despite the transformation of the parable from the religious to the political sphere, the main problem remains unsolved: As long as these values do not become universal, the theory does not work. Or, in the words of Rainer Forst, tolerance only becomes operative if the principle of “reciprocity and generality” (“Reziprozität und Allgemeinheit”) is followed.<sup>9</sup> Lessing, it seems to me, was much aware of this dilemma. Note that at the end of his play, Daja and the Patriarch – the two unteachable characters – are missing. Only those characters willing to challenge their stereotypes and agree on Nathan’s ‘ideology’ were welcomed to the closed circle of enlightened elite; a dramatically apt, yet from a philosophical viewpoint unsatisfying solution.

In view of this general flaw, it becomes apparent why an audience not looking for evening entertainment but rather intellectual stimulus could hardly be satisfied with the play. The attacks on Pearl Harbor had occurred only a few weeks before and at the time of the premiere, the United States was already at war:

[...] [W]e came from the theatre again definitely impressed by the persuasiveness of his arguments for racial and religious tolerance, only to run smack into screaming headlines proclaiming the loss of 700 United States service men in the sinking

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. R. Forst, *Toleranz im Konflikt. Geschichte, Gehalt und Gegenwart eines umstrittenen Begriffs*, Frankfurt am Main 2003.

of three American ships. [...] Piscator's production offered a pilgrimage for those who might be of a mind to seek peace for their souls rather than stimulation for their war spirit.<sup>10</sup>

This quotation is quite illuminative because it shows the ambivalence inherent in this response to the play: Bruckner's message of tolerance is not considered wrong; it is even raised to the realm of moral uplift. Nevertheless, civilian loyalty had to come first: "The final curtain of *Nathan the Wise* leaves any man of good will warmly uplifted. But in retrospect, disturbing questions arise. Is tolerance a real solution? How far can – how far should – tolerance be extended? Shall we for example be tolerant of intolerance?"<sup>11</sup> The underlying question was whether America should have foregone involvement in the war even after the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Officially, of course, this question had disappeared from the political agenda. Even strong isolationists, such as *America First*, needed to accept that their concern had turned into a lost cause.<sup>12</sup> Despite this complete change of mood, Bruckner maintained his pacifistic motif (also in 1944, when the play was restaged) and this kind of persistence imposes the task of revealing some possible reasons behind his decision. Examining his life as an exiled Jewish artist – and in conjunction with that identity role conflicts – might lead to a better understanding of the adaptation. In the scope of this paper, I will elaborate on this hypothesis in two steps: first, by pointing to the rising anti-Semitism in America during the war; second, by explaining the identity crisis of so-called 'alien enemies' of German-speaking backgrounds.

Before I go into detail, however, I briefly need to address another topic, namely Bruckner's Jewish family background. Interestingly enough, Bruckner was born under the name of Theodor Tagger, son of Erasmus Tagger, a direct ancestor of the famous Sephardic Tadjer family.<sup>13</sup> In 1915, Bruckner seceded from Judaism; an act that did not go unnoticed. No less a person than Martin Buber asked Bruckner to take a stand on his decision. And Bruckner did not hesitate to respond, even publicly.<sup>14</sup> Through this open letter we learn that

<sup>10</sup> *New York Daily News*, April 4, 1942.

<sup>11</sup> *Commonweal*, April 17, 1942.

<sup>12</sup> By April 1942, the association was dissolved.

<sup>13</sup> The Tadjer dynasty had once been so powerful and (notoriously) famous that even a proverb evolved related to their name. Cf. I. Moskona, About one of the components of the language "djudezmo", *Godišnik* 6 (1971), pp. 179–220. I wish to express my thanks to Amor Ayala for calling my attention to this source.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. T. Tagger, Brief an einen Juden, *Die Weissen Blätter, Eine Monatsschrift* 3 (1916) März-April, pp. 250–253.

Bruckner was very much aware of the modern discourses on the possibilities of Jewish identities and their construction. From this “dingy pond of mixed feelings and thoughts” (“sich trübende Zusammenmischung verschiedenster Gefühle und Überlegungen”) he filtered two options: being Jewish on the grounds of a religious or a national affiliation. Yet, Bruckner did not like either of them. Directly referring to Ernest Renan, he rather pondered the task to productively adapt to the non-Jewish majority. We can thus conclude that he experienced a kind of “secondary conversion” (Dan Diner),<sup>15</sup> preserving a Jewish identity beyond strict denominational or national boundaries. This becomes evident in his literary as well as journalistic works, which give proof of his solidarity, if not identification with the Jewish people.<sup>16</sup>

This (indistinct) Jewish identity was vulnerable to anti-Semitic attacks. For exiles, Jews and non-Jews alike, the experience of anti-Semitic violence gave way to bitter disappointment.<sup>17</sup> Names such as Father McCoughlin and Charles Lindbergh outline the spectrum of public Jew-baiting. A climax was reached at the time when Bruckner was finishing his adaption and preparing the rehearsals. On September 11<sup>th</sup>, Lindbergh delivered his notorious Des Moines Speech in which he accused England, the Roosevelt administration, and ‘the Jews’ of dragging America into war:

No person with a sense of the dignity of mankind can condone the persecution of the Jewish race in Germany. But no person of honesty and vision can look on their pro-war policy here today without seeing the dangers involved in such a policy both for us and for them. Instead of agitating for war, the Jewish groups in this country should be opposing it in every possible way for they will be among the first to feel its consequences. Tolerance is a virtue that depends upon peace and strength. History shows that it cannot survive war and devastations. A few far-sighted Jewish people realize this and stand opposed to intervention. But the majority still do not.<sup>18</sup>

Lindbergh’s speech caused an outcry among American Jewry. Mostly though, this outcry developed into a defensive attitude, which can be exemplarily illustrated by the *American Jewish Congress*’ response in the *New York Times*:

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<sup>15</sup> D. Diner, Editorial, *Simon Dubnow Institute Yearbook*, 3 (2004), pp. 9–13.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. F. Bruckner, Schicksal, *Aufbau*, 6 (1940) 52 (27.12.1940), p. 9.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. S.H. Norwood, ‘Marauding Youth and the Christian Front: Antisemitic Violence in Boston and New York During World War II,’ *American Jewish History*, 91 (2003) 2, pp. 233–267.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted after R.H. Abzug, *America Views the Holocaust, 1933–1945, A Brief Documentary History*, Bedford/St Martin’s 1999, p. 102.

The governing council of the *American Jewish Congress* wishes to make clear that, 'far from agitating for war', Jewish groups have, since the beginning of Hitler's attack not only on them but on all religion and humanity itself, exerted the utmost restraint, that like all peace-loving, loyal Americans, they had hoped that Hitler's attack upon human freedom might be ended without the involvement of any country in war.<sup>19</sup>

"Peace-loving" and "loyal", those were the ideals American Jews as well as emigrated Jews were expected to live up to. For that reason, the pacifistic stance expressed in Bruckner's adaption can be read as a response to the anti-Semitic stereotype of Jewish warmongering.

This response must not be confused with a thoughtless reflex, because it also reflects how an exile could be torn between loyalty for the country of refuge and fear for his or her home country, especially the family, friends, and colleagues left behind there. Although there can be no doubt that Bruckner and Piscator were staunch opponents of the Nazi regime, they both cherished the hope of returning someday. Thus, it is conceivable that Bruckner was hesitant to join in the war effort and support military intervention. Or, more precisely, he was looking for ways to limit damage. Similarly, in correspondence with the American dramatist Elmer Rice, Piscator explained:

[Y]es, I agree with you on the complete defeat of Hitler's Germany, but your line which reads 'with the greatest possible number of German casualties' should be amended to read 'German Nazi casualties – both in the Army and in the German civilian population.'<sup>20</sup>

For the time being, their home country was lost but, as mentioned earlier, they were determined to preserve their memory or – with regards to the postwar period – imagine a better Germany.<sup>21</sup> In an undated draft, Bruckner wrote: "When an exile comes to a new country he takes his 'Heimat' along. An intellectual keeps it in his brains, in his work. If he is no mediocrity he cannot adjust himself easily."<sup>22</sup> In America, however, their 'Heimat' was now called the enemy

<sup>19</sup> *New York Times*, September 21, 1941.

<sup>20</sup> Erwin Piscator in a letter to Elmer Rice (undated; probably October 1944) quoted after P. Diezel, *Erwin Piscator, Briefe, New York, 1939–1945*, Berlin 2009, pp. 380–381, here p. 381.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Bruckner's critical article on the role of writers in the reconstruction of postwar Germany: F. Bruckner, Nachwort zum P.E.N.-Kongress in London, *Das Versagen der Schriftsteller, Aufbau*, 7 (1941) 40 (03.10.1941), p. 11.

<sup>22</sup> F. Bruckner, *There is a German word, „Heimat“*, Stiftung Archiv Akademie der Künste Berlin-Brandenburg, Ferdinand Bruckner Archiv, 1121.

country; its (former) residents ‘enemy aliens’. Whole sections in the German exile newspaper *Aufbau* echo its readers’ hurt feelings: fear of being deprived of civil rights (such as freedom of movement), anger at being called an enemy. In the press, these feelings were summed up by the term ‘enemy alien stigma’.<sup>23</sup> For refugees then, it was very hard to accept being called an ‘enemy alien’ after having turned their back on the *real* enemy to seek refuge in America.<sup>24</sup>

Although the preceding examples give but a glimpse of the historical situation, they help to develop an understanding of the complex identity conflict. Identities evolve in response to ‘the other’. For Jewish émigrés such as Ferdinand Bruckner, ‘the other’ became manifest in the American majority. The experience of discrimination or stigmatization (for being an exile, a Jew, or an alien enemy; a suspect, in any case) resulted in a distorted self-perception. Correspondingly, Bruckner’s adaptation can be read as the result of his exile experience. With *Nathan the Wise* we come across a messenger of peace and understanding. Marked by his experiences as an exile, Nathan does not turn out to be an avenger but a Jew who eventually entrusts his daughter to his foe (even despite the fact that the Templar behaves much more aggressively than in the original by Lessing). The question of whether tolerance can turn militant remains open for discussion.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. the following exemplary reports from the *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*: “Dickstein Renews Request for Probe of Enemy Aliens” July 24, 1942 and “Exemption of Anti-Nazis from Enemy-alien Restrictions Studied in Washington” October 1926, 1942.

<sup>24</sup> Strikingly, between Jewish and non-Jewish refugees a bitter quarrel flared up on the question of who deserved the greatest respect for having fled Germany, as an article in the *Aufbau* from February 20, 1942 attests.

<sup>25</sup> Interestingly, if we analyze Bruckner’s adaptation in the context of his complete exilic oeuvre, a change from pacifism to militant resistance can be observed. See K.-M. Hinneburg (i.e. Kocyba), ‘Die Freiheit kostet entweder nur Worte oder sie kostet Blut.’ Formen des Widerstands im Exilwerk Ferdinand Bruckners in Julia Maria Mönig / Anna Orlikowski (ed.), *Exil interdisziplinär*, Würzburg 2014, pp. 86–99.