



**Comic Metatheater and Language Learning: Performing  
Ludwig Tieck's *Der gestiefelte Kater***

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## Comic Metatheater and Language Learning: Performing Ludwig Tieck's *Der gestiefelte Kater*

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This paper argues that comic metatheater is a genre particularly suited for communicative language learning in project-oriented foreign-language theater courses. My argument draws on experience in teaching an undergraduate seminar at the University of Washington in Spring 2003; this course (German 304: Performing a German Play) resulted in two performances of Ludwig Tieck's *Der gestiefelte Kater*. Examples from both the structure of Tieck's play and my students' rehearsals and performances illuminate the ludic context that made it possible for students to embrace both language learning and amateur acting as a pleasurable comedy of errors. The paper highlights the emphasis placed on improvisation and hyperbolic acting in course assignments. In the final section of the paper, I discuss the play in the context of cultural and literary-historical learning and examine the pedagogical significance of assignments given to students to update the play's satire of popular culture. The paper's evaluation of the different phases of the course, from interpretation and editing to production and staging of the play, culminates in an argument for a playful and improvisational approach to project-oriented foreign-language theater.

### 1. Introduction

Despite their obvious benefits, project-oriented foreign language theater courses pose a problem for communicative language teachers. How can the principles of communicative language teaching be upheld in a class that consists primarily of the rehearsal of a play, in which the students receive roles and memorize them for performance? How can inflexible roles and rote memorization be paired with the spontaneity and open-ended use of the target language that is one of the primary goals of communicative language teaching? It is with these questions in mind that I would like to discuss a third-year language course that I taught at the University of Washington in the spring of 2003. The course, entitled "Performing a German Play," culminated in two performances of Ludwig Tieck's *Der gestiefelte Kater*. While an emphasis on the five areas of communicative language teaching, namely listening, speaking, reading, writing, and culture, was implicit in the course structure, I explicitly stressed speaking and culture. The main goals of this course were to improve the students' conversational skills, help them overcome fears of speaking freely in front of others, and convey a sense of German culture at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. To achieve these ends I planned to create a light-hearted and playful space in which students

felt comfortable taking risks; I wanted to engender the impulsive atmosphere described by Stephen Smith, who argues that “the impulsive language learner may make more frequent mistakes than the laboriously reflective speaker, but he or she probably communicates more overall” (1984: 10). The following paper will discuss my attempts to foster spontaneity through exercises that emphasize both spoken German and cultural knowledge. I will first discuss the usefulness of comic metatheatrical pieces such as Tieck’s *Kater* for communicative language learning. I will then turn to the structure and activities of the course and examine my in-class emphasis on improvisation and a hyperbolic acting style. In the final section I will scrutinize my approach to cultural and literary-historical learning.

## **2. Comic Metatheater and Ludwig Tieck’s *Der gestiefelte Kater***

Before I discuss the course I’d like to explain my rationale for using comic metatheater in a project-oriented foreign language theater course. Clearly there is a strong connection between role-playing and language learning – but why metatheater<sup>1</sup>? What is the pedagogical usefulness of theater that breaks its illusion and calls attention to its own staginess, that presents “Theater auf dem Theater” to its audience (Poschmann 1997: 90)? It seems to me that such theater provides an open atmosphere that will ease the pressure on the students, who as both language learners and – as is often the case – amateur actors find themselves in a stressful situation. In other words, if the play itself constantly interrupts or breaks theatrical illusion, the pressure to perform perfectly will be lessened and students can act within a less restricted, more playful framework; if it does not matter that a student errs or falls out of his or her role, the student can more easily accept mishaps and mis-speaking as a part of the language learning process. Douglas Moody recently applied this logic in a Spanish theater course that culminated in the production of Calderon’s *La Dama Duenda*. Moody and his class subtitled their final performance “a rehearsal” and added the figure of Calderon as a narrator and prompter for the other actors (Moody 2002: 150). As

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. Poschmann for a summary of discussions concerning the terms metadrama and metatheater (1997: 89-95). While Ludwig Tieck’s *Der gestiefelte Kater* could also be described as a metadrama, I use the term metatheater here because of our specific focus on staging the play.

they and as I have applied it, metatheatricality appears to ease the performance pressure on students and provide more room for the stumbling that is inherent to learning a language.

But why *comic* metatheater? Self-reflexive drama can also be rather serious, as much of Goethe's *Faust* and many of Brecht's didactic plays illustrate. I chose a comic medium because of the parallels I've observed between comedy and the process of language learning. Theorists of comedy (Arnzten 1975; Stierle 1976) argue that comic situations are defined by repetitive failure that retards progression and resists resolution while eliciting the laughter of onlookers. For example, slapstick scenarios focus on the repeated errors of the characters and rarely upon plot progression. And indeed, on a day-to-day basis, language learning can often feel like a series of episodic errors without progress; language learners constantly find themselves in linguistic slapstick scenarios. Every language learner can usually recount a humorous misunderstanding or error in the target language; amongst German students in the United States, for example, a common error of this sort arises when a student wants to say that she or he finds the weather warm – "mir ist heiß" – but mistakenly implies that he or she is sexually aroused – "ich bin heiß." Fortunately, Aristotle's dictum about comedy also applies to language learning: the errors and mishaps cause no harm in the end. The student who confuses temperature with sexual arousal will not die from embarrassment, but rather eventually learn a new subtlety of the German language. In language learning, errors actually enhance the learning process; as the cliché goes, we all learn from our mistakes. In my choice of a comic play for the course, I tried to create a playful environment in which the painfulness of this cliché was dulled and students felt comfortable erring their way to better German.

Ludwig Tieck's *Der gestiefelte Kater* clearly fits into the parameters of what I have been calling comic metatheater. Written in 1797, Tieck's "Kindermärchen in Drei Akten mit Zwischenspielen, einem Prologe und Epiloge" broke so much with dramatic convention that its first successful staging did not occur until 1921 (Biesterfeld 1988: 63). Both a play about a failed play and a satire of late 18<sup>th</sup> century culture, *Der gestiefelte Kater* begins with a prologue in which several bourgeois audience members enter the theater, take their seats, and discuss the play announced on the programme: *Der gestiefelte Kater*. Before the play even begins, the audience members, who are worried that the play will offend their Enlightenment sensibilities, threaten to riot until they are appeased by the appearance of the

poet on stage, who promises a tasteful performance. This opening scene is followed by a seemingly traditional production of the fairy tale “Puss in Boots,” which is so often interrupted by comments from the fictive audience as well as by comic errors made on stage that the actors become increasingly confused and fall out of their roles. At the end of both the second and third acts, for example, Tieck’s fictional audience becomes so enraged that the play momentarily stops while the poet brings out the “Besänftiger” – the “calmer” – a musician who appeases the audience by playing songs from Mozart’s *Zauberflöte*. The complexity of *Der gestiefelte Kater* might make it a daunting choice for performance by third-year language students. However, I believe that Tieck’s play about a failed play provides an excellent context for an impulsive and communicative language learning approach. Its built-in imperfections free the actors from the pressure for perfection, because any real mishaps that occur on stage can be assimilated into the overarching chaotic structure of the play.

### **3. Improvisation and Exaggeration**

The language course in which we read and staged Tieck’s play took place over a 10 week quarter and culminated in two performances of the play at a small theater. Eleven third year German students were registered for the class, which consisted of three fifty minute sessions and one two-and-a-half hour practice session per week. For the first three weeks we read and interpreted the play and also discussed it in the context of German culture and literature at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. All students had to choose a role or roles by the end of the third week, and we began blocking and rehearsals in the fourth week of class. Due to budget concerns, we were only able to hold four rehearsal sessions in the actual theater, all of which took place in the two weeks before the performances. While vocabulary, essay, and line-memorization assignments were done outside of class time, I would like to focus here on activities from class sessions. In order to re-create the play’s comic impulsiveness in class, I emphasized improvisation and exaggeration in language and acting warm-ups and exercises throughout the quarter. This focus dovetailed nicely with the actual structure of the play and removed some of the pressure on the students.

Many of the warm-ups with which I began class sessions focused on verbal improvisation, a skill that I hoped would not only prove to be useful on stage, but above all in real life scenarios in the target language. My main goal was to force students to react quickly to unexpected situations in German. Perhaps the most popular and exemplary exercise of this sort was a game we called "Der arrogante Professor." In this improvisation game, students were all given a sheet of paper and asked to write down a possible topic for a lecture; I encouraged them to be as creative and/or absurd as they liked and we received topics such as "The significance of the chicken in the 18<sup>th</sup> century," "Goethe's secret life as a transvestite," and "Why I'm wearing these silly clothes." After collecting the topics, a student would come to the front of the class, pull a topic from the pile, and then proceed to give a 60 second spontaneous lecture in German as an arrogant expert on that particular topic. Although a difficult task, the students all showed the ability to talk their way through the sixty seconds as long as they understood all of the words in the topic. In order to maximize the amount of speaking time for each student, I often split the class up into three groups of 3-4 people and let them perform for each other. As the performance dates moved closer, however, my students noted that they preferred ad-libbing in front of the entire class, even though it gave each individual student less speaking time. Here I found myself caught between the desire to practice communication skills, which occurred most efficiently in small groups, and performance skills, which were best elicited when the students improvised in front of the entire class. Improvisational games that called for multiple players proved more helpful in maximizing verbal participation while recreating a performance atmosphere. A class favorite of this sort was a game in which three students were sent out of the classroom while the others thought of a scenario they would have to spontaneously act out in front of the group. While they always took place in German and I often had to help out with vocabulary, I think the true value of these improvisational games came in the confidence gained by the students and the ability to act and react more comfortably in a fluid environment.

During rehearsals, I reminded the students that we were performing a play about a failed play, and that any 'real' error or mishap on their parts could be covered up by improvisation; I also gave the three students who played the bourgeois audience members the freedom to improvise comments when a scene change took too long or something

unexpected happened. Two anecdotes from the actual performances exemplify their success in adapting to the unexpected. On the first night, the main character – Hinze the cat – was in the middle of a monologue when someone’s mobile phone went off in the audience. One of my students playing an audience member immediately cried out “Was? Ein Handy!??” and elicited laughter from the audience, and then Hinze, on stage, stared down the person with the phone and used the lines in her monologue to comment on the incident: “Ist es nicht die Pflicht des Edeln, sich und seine Neigungen dem Glück seiner Mitgeschöpfe auszuopfern?” (Tieck 1964: 30). On the second night, the Hanswurst character improvised her way out of an accident on stage. She was pushing a large podium off the stage while the cat was about to enter into another monologue when both she and the podium fell over. After getting up she asked the cat for help to remove the podium; meanwhile the student playing the ‘poet’ had the presence of mind to enter and help out as well, bowing to the audience as if it had been an accident for which he, the writer, was sorry. Afterwards the student playing Hinze calmed the still giggling audience with an improvised transition to her solemn monologue: “Ja, Sie lachen . . . aber ich bin ganz melancholisch.” The focus on improvisation not only made the performances more enjoyable for the students, but also provided invaluable practice in using the target language spontaneously.

Another tool I emphasized in both acting games and in the rehearsals was exaggeration. I chose this approach not only because an overt acting style is easier for an amateur actor than a more subtle one, but, more importantly, because I believe the willingness to exaggerate is a key to success in a communicative language learning context. In several years of language teaching, I have found that many students hold back or move more slowly while speaking in open-ended group activities because they are too focused on finding the perfect word. A willingness to exaggerate, however, can motivate students to focus on the broader aspects of communication and avoid the often detrimental search for the ideal expression. And a penchant for exaggeration is also extremely useful for learning pronunciation in a foreign language; conscious exaggeration of an accent leads to more careful enunciation. In order to foster this tendency, I always told my students that more was better than less during acting games and rehearsals. During our first two hour acting session, we focused on the usefulness of hyperbolic body language for communication. The class came up with a list of different feelings and we then all attempted to perform these

feelings through gestures. We came up with a scale of 1 to 10, with ten being the most extreme, and everyone had to act out different emotions at the top of the scale, such as fear 10, sadness 10, or inebriation 10. The following week I brought in selected lines from the play and had students recite them in different heightened emotional states, which combined the gestural techniques we had practiced with verbal ones. The extreme scenarios that we came up with for improvisation also forced students to engage in a hyperbolic acting style. The focus on exaggeration created, for the most part, a general openness to silliness and impulsive acting in the class that facilitated a more carefree and productive environment.

But what about students who are not receptive to this emphasis on exaggeration? At the beginning of the quarter, one of my students had particular difficulty in the acting exercises and with his role, which was initially that of the farmer's son Gottlieb. Because his difficulties appeared to emanate from both shyness and inexperience in acting, both of which are impediments to second language acquisition, I asked him if he would like to play the role of the Princess. I theorized that it would be easier for him to exaggerate in the opposite gender role than to play a character with whom he could identify. Indeed, what started with a dress and a high-pitched voice led to faster and more profound character discoveries. He soon began to exploit the humor in his role as a princess who is not interested in men, but rather "die Wissenschaften," "die Künste," and "Bücher" (Tieck 1964: 18). In his new role, he quickly became one of the comic highlights of the play and provided a much more engaging performance. The performance of our male Princess exemplifies the principle behind the emphasis of exaggeration; the assumption of a role that clearly differs from what the student considers to be his or her own identity facilitates a more playful and open use of the target language, because it provides an emotional distance from any errors or mishaps that occur.

#### **4. Playful Cultural Learning**

A secondary course goal was to impart a knowledge of literature and culture in Germany at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Tieck's play contains a biting satire of Enlightenment aesthetics and bourgeois tastes in theater at the time (as represented by the hypocritical audience). The play itself parodies several genres, including melodrama, the *Ritterdrama* of *Sturm und*



*Drang*, and opera; it also abounds with parodistic allusions to popular plays and operas of the day. Concerned about the obscurity of many of these allusions, I decided to first introduce the class to overarching literary and cultural issues in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and then increasingly ask them to relate the satire to contemporary US-culture. Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte*, which we read and discussed before reading Tieck's play, provided an excellent introduction to the issues I wanted to discuss, namely the tension between education and entertainment that can be found in late Enlightenment aesthetics. Our brief discussion of the plot and themes of *The Magic Flute* made clear the Enlightenment emphasis on moral precepts in art. Additionally, the figure of Papegeno occasioned discussion of the clown or Hanswurst figure, whom Johann Gottsched banned from the Enlightenment stage but who continued to perform in Wiener Volkstheater during this period. Although we discussed specific aspects of German literary history, I found it far more important that the students understand the general gist of the play's cultural satire. I therefore encouraged the class to draw parallels between the popular culture ridiculed by the play and that of the students' own current cultural context in the United States. For the first writing assignment, I asked students to write a dialogue from the perspective of Tieck's fictional audience, whose fickle and static artistic expectations are a focal point of the play - they only want to see what they know or have seen before, heckle rudely when something clashes with their bourgeois tastes, and in essence fill the role of the comic villain who retards the resolution of the play. In response to this assignment to update the audience's comments, several of my students wrote amusing dialogues in which the audience members discussed their interest in reality TV or in Hollywood films. Others portrayed the hecklers as would-be culture snobs with a hypocritical weakness for American kitsch. This assignment and other in-class discussions of contemporary parallels prepared the class for creative editing of the play during blocking and rehearsal sessions.

During rehearsals, I encouraged the class to suggest changes to cultural allusions in the play. In particular, the three students who played audience members updated several of their references of popular culture – for example, an allusion to August von Kotzebue's play *Der Papagei* was redirected to the movie *Babe the Pig*. Also, several of the students adapted their roles in a contemporary fashion; the Hanswurst figure dressed not as a clown of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Viennese stage, but of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, and in an topical move, a

student playing a foreign prince with imperialist tendencies donned a cowboy hat and spoke German with a Texas accent. The biggest change the class made to the actual play, however, came at the end of the third act. I noted in my brief plot summary of the play that at the end of the second and third acts, the fictive audience becomes so scandalized that they boo the actors to a standstill. In both acts, the poet then brings out the “Besänftiger”, who calms the audience by playing songs from Mozart’s *The Magic Flute*. Charmed by the eternal appeal of Mozart’s dancing animals on stage, we decided to use the music from *The Magic Flute* that Tieck suggested for the end of the second act, but for the finale I asked the class to come up with something contemporary. In their search to find a contemporary to both the extreme popularity of *The Magic Flute* and the apparent simplicity of its plot, my students turned to Hollywood and chose the James Decameron film *Titantic* and the accompanying song “My heart will go on” by Celine Dion. In our performance of the play, the “Besänftiger” sang a karaoke version of “My heart will go on” while Gottlieb and the Princess performed a dumbshow of scenes from the movie *Titantic* to the delight of the fictive audience. In Tieck’s ending, Gottlieb appeases the audience by enduring a *Magic Flute*-like trial by fire and water in order to become worthy of the Princess’ hand. In our production, Gottlieb (i.e. “Jack”) showed his worthiness by saving the Princess (“Rose”) from the shipwreck of the *Titantic* during the dumbshow. Certainly, the comparison between Celine Dion and Mozart was unfair, but the key for me was that the students understood Tieck’s attack on the excessive popularity of *The Magic Flute* amongst educated audiences of the time. While this comparative approach could justly be deemed inaccurate by an 18<sup>th</sup> century scholar, it helped me circumvent frontal and dry lecture-type scenarios. Furthermore, it actively engaged the students in the discussion of German culture, which is a legitimate part of the target language.

## 5. Conclusions

In conclusion, I would like to return to the question with which I began this paper, namely the feasibility of reconciling communicative language teaching with the rehearsal of a play. As I have implicitly argued, the opposition between project-oriented language theater and communicative language learning only stands if one adheres to a static notion of theater as

the rote memorization and subsequent presentation of a dramatic text. If, on the other hand, one treats the rehearsal and production of a play as a fluid process of collective interpretation shaped by both its actors/producers and its author, ultimately the apparent opposition between communicative language teaching and the production of a foreign language play collapses: improvisation, creative editing, and other open-ended process work can be incorporated into performance. In the context of my own course, Tieck's humorous play about a failed play invited a dissolution of the boundaries between process and product and thus facilitated a playful and creative stance on the part of its actors/interpreters/producers. However, I am by no means arguing here that every project-oriented theater course should work at the narrow crossroads of comedy and metatheater; it seems to me that the improvisational and creative approach taken in my course could be applied to a wide range of performance work, including project-oriented courses that culminate in the production of serious and/or canonical foreign language dramas. From the perspective of the communicative language teacher, the active and creative participation of the students is more important than the specific dramatic text chosen for performance. The primary goal should be to transform the classroom into a space of experimentation and play, and the students into versatile clowns. Because in communicative language learning, the most successful students usually resemble Hanswurst figures, willing to adapt, improvise and exaggerate, to engage in silliness when necessary and, most importantly, willing to laugh off their own mistakes.

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## **Biodata**

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