

**James Skidmore**

Today I'm speaking with Sara Jackson, author of *The Problem of the Actress in Modern German Theater and Thought*, published by Camden House. Sara is Associate Professor of German at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Her scholarship is at the intersection of modernism, women and gender studies, theatre, and even science. Sara, welcome and congratulations on being named to the shortlist.

**Sara Jackson**

Thank you so much.

**James Skidmore**

Great to have you here. Your study of actresses in late 19th and early 20th-century Germany, that fin-de-siècle time – but we don't want to say fin de siècle because then we'll be thinking Austria, and we're concentrating on Wilhelmine Germany – it sees them as more than just players on a stage but as important contributors to the intellectual discourses of the time. And the publisher's blurb states: since "actresses bridged varied fields of thought, women who were actresses had a consequential impact that resonated in and far beyond the theater." Can you tell us how this worked?

**Sara Jackson**

Yeah. So, obviously, I'm looking at actresses and their performances on stage, and there were many people who went to the theatre and saw them performing on stage, as we know from general theatre history from this period. But I'm also expanding that influence, or recognizing the expansion of that influence, well beyond the stage through other means. So, most practically and directly, theatre criticism and theatre journalism at the time was hugely important. I think almost every single newspaper of the period published theatre reviews. There were theatre journals specifically to review productions and talk more theoretically about theatre as well. And theatre and cultural critics were very influential in the period. And they really fixated on these actresses because they were playing such kind of controversial and radical roles on the stage, like Salome and Judith and Lulu and some of these things. So there would really be hundreds of reviews of all of these productions, and these actresses were really at the centre. Beyond that, though, they were also doing their own writing; they wrote their own theoretical texts about performance, they wrote autobiographies, they gave public speeches, they were involved in all sorts of cultural and political and social movements. They also really were connected to a lot of important figures – or, I should say, figures we recognize as being important already, because there are many important people that we don't always acknowledge. And so they really had a lot of influence, we can say, behind the scenes as well, off the stage, because of these relationships they had with authors, politicians, gallery owners, artists, philosophers, theorists, all sorts of things like that. So they were really involved in a lot of things that we don't always think about.

**James Skidmore**

It sounds like they were at the nexus of things, that through them or via their presence or their occupation or their activity, a number of varied strands of thought or of activity were coming together.

**Sara Jackson**

Absolutely. And I was just going to say, I think cultural historians have already recognized that theatre has this function more generally. We also recognize that in literature. And a lot of these people were all involved in the same reading, the same things, going to see the same theatrical productions; and the

theatre really is this kind of public forum for social, cultural, [and] political debate and, really, radical thought in Germany. And these women were at the centre of that.

**James Skidmore**

It's true, right? Of course. We talked about that for years, the idea of theatre as a discursive space, literature as a discursive space – in theatre's case, literally, and in literature's case maybe a little more metaphorically. But this is interesting. Your work is interesting because it's about the actors, or in this case, the actresses themselves, [which] is where that discourse is taking place. It's interesting because you start your book with this quotation from Nietzsche, who wrote *The Gay Science*: "The problem of the actor has disquieted me the longest." You use the English translation there. I'm wondering why actors unsettled Nietzsche, and I'm wondering if actresses are unsettling you.

**Sara Jackson**

That's a great question. Of course, as scholars, we always love these moments when we find that gem that just kind of [inaudible 00:05:05]. You can't get that lucky to find something like that. But yes of course, I mean, it's Nietzsche. So power, it's all about power. And I think, subjectivity, of course, is a key element for him, [and] he says in that same passage: what's really the problem [is] the ability for people who should not have power or don't seem like they would have power being able to claim that through performance, through pretending to be something that they are not, or convincing other people. And that's the other side of it, right? It's not just about performing; it's about performing well and being convincing with your performances. And I think there's a desire that comes through in that text and in other texts that I found from this period, talking about these questions, to really neatly differentiate being and performance, and to be able to identify them very clearly and categorize them. But you can feel in the Nietzsche text and in other texts this kind of fear or desperation at recognizing their own inability to do that; that performance is such a slippery category, [that] it is somehow always present. And that kind of key question of modernity, about "who am I?" and "what does it mean to be me?" and "what is being and identity and subjectivity and performance?" really complicates that. And the fact that women seem to be able to do that so well, to perform so well, both literally and conceptually, to kind of understand and access the power of performance, was really what was unsettling and scary about the whole thing.

**James Skidmore**

Unsettling to you or unsettling to the people of the time? To the critics, the theatregoers?

**Sara Jackson**

Yeah, I think unsettling to the people of the time who are writing about that. And maybe to me, in a different way. I mean, I have to say, yes, they're unsettling, right? And that they should be. And that's kind of the whole premise of the book, and thinking about this power that actresses and actors and lots of other people – but, here, looking specifically at actresses – that they have this ability to, in the best possible ways, unsettle our conceptions of what it means to be a woman or the stability of these categories. So, yes. Let's say yes.

**James Skidmore**

You're right. I mean, that quotation by Nietzsche is a gem because it does help you set up the whole premise for the research or for the book. So I think that's really smart. In the book, you focus on a couple of actresses in particular. There are of course numerous ones, I suppose, you could have

looked at, but you looked at two in particular, Tilla Durieux and Gertrud Eysoldt. And I'm wondering [if you could] tell us a bit about them and especially what made them stand out for you.

### **Sara Jackson**

Both Durieux and Eysoldt were truly exceptional women, both in terms of what they were doing in the theatre and in themselves as human beings in the world, I think. And I think their exceptional status would make them immediately jump out to anyone who was doing research on German theatre in the early 20th century; or it should make them jump out to anyone who's not just looking at dramatic texts or the directors. And these directors, male directors from the early 20th century, like Max Reinhardt, tend to really kind of draw all of the focus for these theatrical innovations – when really, they were collaborating and recognized themselves as collaborators with their performers, set designers, and all the different kind of agents of meaning-making that participate in theatrical productions.

I started out as a drama scholar reading dramas and analyzing dramas, and at some point I started asking, well, drama is not theatre, and what's happening in the theatre is related to drama, but it's not the same thing. So I was getting frustrated with reading scholarship that equated the two things and made claims about the theatre by analyzing drama as literature. So then I started thinking, well, how do I access what was actually happening in the theatre? Which is difficult; that's the difficult thing about theatre research. Theatre reviews are obviously the most immediate thing you can go to. [Also,] Reinhardt, of course, had director's books where he wrote his conceptions of how the drama should be performed. You can [also] get photographs. But once you start reading reviews of some of these dramas, like the Lulu plays [or] Electra, it's all about the actresses. It's all about the actresses, who are really at the centre of these things. And when you look at the way that the critics wrote about these women, it's really fantastic. It's really another gem to find. They're really descriptive. They're very emotional about it. They have really strong feelings and opinions. They're really clearly very strongly impacted by them. And so then, Tilla Durieux and Gertrud Eysoldt came up over and over again for me in these reviews because of the plays I was looking at that starred strong female characters. So that's really kind of how I came across the two of them.

And I try to make clear in the book that they are certainly exceptional. They're not representative of every actress' experience and what all actresses could do and did do in this period. But because of how prominent they were and how connected they were to so many people, as I was discussing before, they kind of, I hope, function a little bit maybe like a crowbar to open up this box that we've been stuck in for understanding what's happening in the theatre and in German social and cultural life in this period – so that we can also look for all of the other actresses and women who were contributing actively to the production of this social and cultural life.

### **James Skidmore**

Yeah. You rely heavily on reviews, as you state, and the reviews you bring forward [are] good reviews. They're interesting to read just on their own. They have their own merit in terms of their sometimes incisive, sometimes bitter, sometimes outrageous commentary on the plays that the reviews are reviewing. But with the actresses, you were able to find material that sort of stems directly from the actresses themselves, right? Can you tell us a bit about that?

### **Sara Jackson**

Yes, absolutely. So, I mean, it's maybe a stereotype, but actresses love talking about themselves. [laughing]

**James Skidmore**

Gee, looking at Instagram, I would never know that. [laughing]

**Sara Jackson**

Yes, and they really understood themselves as public figures and as important people, which is great. So, Tilla Durieux, one of my favourite tidbits is that she wrote two autobiographies. She had a first autobiography, which she then later expanded: "My First Ninety Years," a great title. She's really an open book, literally. She also wrote a novel that was speculated to have a lot of autobiographical components – that's a complicated designation. She gave speeches that were also pretty scandalous in some cases and were publicized. You can find articles in journals and newspapers about some of these speeches that she gave. Gertrud Eysoldt also, of course, has a very well-documented letter exchange with Hugo von Hofmannsthal that gives a lot of access into—and that's published. So that's, of course, another blessing for a scholar like me to be able to have such direct access to that letter exchange. And so there's a lot of material that you can find about and also by these two actresses. Others as well, but these ones really are quite accessible.

**James Skidmore**

And they're the focus. They take up the limelight in the book. Durieux: what made her so controversial or more controversial than Eysoldt, for example?

**Sara Jackson**

I think she was more public, and intentionally more of a public figure than Eysoldt. My impression from the things that I found and read is that Eysoldt did not seek that public acknowledgement or presence outside of the theatre, offstage, as much as Durieux did. She wrote some essays about performing that were published, but Durieux was really connected to a lot of other public figures as well. I mean, the Cassirer family, she was married into that family. And she gave this one speech that I write about in the book, at this book fair, where she talks about how women should be able to walk naked across the stage in the theatre and then sit next to gentlemen at a society dinner the next day. So she was really, you know, I think she was intentionally provocative like that a lot. So that's kind of the access we have to her.

**James Skidmore**

Yeah. That's an interesting comment because it reminds me [of the following]. There was sort of a sense, and you're a theatre scholar so you understand this better than I do, but my understanding is that actresses in particular were thought of as not much better than – I don't know what would be the proper [term] – not prostitutes per se, but as loose women or as women of questionable morals. Is that playing a role here too? Even though that's changed as the 20th century recognized more the professionalism of acting, I get the sense that, in the 19th century, that hung over actresses, that conception of what they were really like.

**Sara Jackson**

Yes, absolutely. That was a really significant part of the discourses I'm looking at, just the living conditions a lot of these women were facing at the time. This weird tension between being so central, so prominent and central in their role on the stage, but also being socially marginalized because they were not living the way that proper women should live. This was part of the tension in the philosophical, theoretical, and "scientific" works that I look at in the book as well; trying to really

identify actresses as the epitome of womanhood in some ways, but also everything that a good woman shouldn't be. Yeah. So that's certainly something at work here. And, in a speech like the one I just mentioned from Durieux, women like her were actively trying to work against this perception or equation of actresses with sex workers.

**James Skidmore**

Right. I got the sense of also the pushing against notions of respectability, because those notions of respectability were like straitjackets in many ways for women at the time. Now, this book, of course, it's a history of Wilhelmine Germany, a social history of Wilhelmine Germany to some extent. We have a lot of those. It's well-trodden ground. What are you bringing to this conversation that's new or different or trying to change the discussion?

**Sara Jackson**

Is it cheating if I say actresses? [laughing]

**James Skidmore**

I don't think it is.

**Sara Jackson**

And that's certainly not to claim that I'm the first person to recognize actresses as important cultural figures. I'm standing on the shoulders of really wonderful research by other scholars who came before me. But I think [it's about] trying to recognize actresses and their contributions to this moment, this cultural history. We were talking about this idea of them being at the nexus of what was happening and really recognizing that they were, in many ways, really at the centre of kind of a web of many different strands of thoughts and cultural productions. And that they were actively participating in those things. They weren't just objects of fascination or they didn't just represent things that were happening, but they were also actively contributing and changing and influencing some strands of thought and actions that, [historically], the histories we tell have attributed to men who maybe had a muse or a partner behind the scenes who is influencing them. But that's very limiting.

**James Skidmore**

Yeah, it certainly is. Are there other takeaways you want people to take away from the book?

**Sara Jackson**

Yes, I think that idea of what actresses do. That is what's really important to me. And I think this idea of actresses as [multilayered] subjects in the theatre. I was building from Erika Fischer-Lichte's idea of a dual identity of a performer, as having a semiotic and a phenomenal presence. But really, even differentiating that further, thinking about all the different ways that people encountered and still encounter actresses and other performers, really, there's a tendency to reduce performance to representation of someone else's work. Or this idea of actresses as kind of puppets of a text or of a director being told what to do – and the way they do their best work is by doing exactly what they were told to do or what they were supposed to do to represent the text or the idea that they were put on stage to represent. And I don't think that that's the case at all. The best actresses are the ones who interpret, who produce their own presence, their own idea of a performance. So I think that's really important to me. And thinking about that as a way to change how we do history, in a lot of ways, for different figures that we've often maybe categorized as representing someone else's work.

This is also key to translation studies and recognizing women as translators, for example. So that, I think, is really important. And also – sorry, if I could go on a little longer here – the fact that they were actually recognized as doing so at the time. And this was a really key discovery for me. I'm not rewriting history or creating or inventing a narrative [of] recentring women. If you look at the writing about actresses, theatre criticism, what directors like Mark Reinhardt himself wrote, authors like Hofmannsthal, even theorists like Nietzsche and some of the other figures I look at – they really actually recognized actresses and the women who were working as actresses as active subjects, whether they wanted to or not, as influential figures, as makers of meaning, not just representatives. So it's actually the way that we do history that really reduces their influence and their active status. So that I think is really important.

### **James Skidmore**

That is important. They're not just vessels. They're agents. They're contributing to whatever they're putting on the stage. [The writers and directors are] not just pouring words into them and they're speaking them. They have some role in that. And how that's done. That's very good. I like that. That's really interesting.

You know, books answer questions, but they also raise questions. And so: what questions does your book raise?

### **Sara Jackson**

Well, I hope it raises more questions than it answers. I think many of us got into this line of work because questions are more interesting and important than answers. Along those lines, I think so much of the most exciting scholarship to me that's coming out right now is doing this kind of work of looking at these moments in history and asking: who else was there that we are not talking about? And how were they influencing these kind of developments or trajectories that we have attributed to a small number of people? This work has been going on for a very long time. And that idea of acknowledging our profession's own complicity in those kind of erasures and maybe false histories. And, what I was just saying about the fact that these are not things that were happening parallel or behind the scenes, that actresses and many other people were actually recognized agents of influence and change and development at the time. So I think the biggest question that I certainly did not answer and that I'm still interested in with all of this great scholarship that's coming out is: how do these recognitions change larger historical narratives that we have accepted? So what is the bigger transformation that happens in our understanding of history – intellectual history, cultural history – by making these small recognitions over and over again? So that's a question that, of course, is a huge question that we're all answering together. And then: how does recognizing these new narratives change how we see ourselves now, of course? We all want to have some relevance in our current moment as well.

### **James Skidmore**

We certainly do. We're talking about books; what's a book you've read recently that you think others should read?

### **Sara Jackson**

Yeah, this one I might also cheat a little bit on my answer. I have the great pleasure of working with the journal *Feminist German Studies* now. And so I'm getting to see a lot of really exciting new scholarship before it's even coming out. And it's so inspiring to me to have access to that and to be able to see what people are doing. And with the journals focus on intersectional feminist studies, it's really the

kind of scholarship that's most exciting to me. So that's really where I'm getting my inspiration and excitement right now.

**James Skidmore**

And that's the renamed journal for Women in German, is that right? It was called just Women in German before, right? Or no, it was Yearbook or something.

**Sara Jackson**

Yes, it was the Women in German Yearbook, and then a few years ago renamed to Feminist German Studies.

**James Skidmore**

That's a great recommendation. It is a very good journal. So it's nice to give it some credit.

**Sara Jackson**

Shameless plug. [laughing]

**James Skidmore**

That's very good. I think that's just fine.

We've just spoken to Sara Jackson, author of *The Problem of the Actress in Modern German Theatre and Thought*. Sara, thanks for speaking to me today and for telling us all about your wonderful book. Thank you.

**Sara Jackson**

Thank you so much. It was a pleasure talking with you.