

Marathon Mensch

BY JONATHAN KALB

It would be hard to exaggerate the tenacity of Faust in the modern imagination. In the centuries since the appearance of Johann Spiess's *Faustbuch* in 1587 and Christopher Marlowe's *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* shortly thereafter, the adjective "Faustian" has become common coin around the globe, an astonishingly malleable trope for overreaching of every stamp. Faust himself, moreover, or someone very like him with a different name—an esoterically learned man, typically a secluded loner, who makes some sort of pact with crafty powers to realize his visions and desires and then confronts awful consequences—has been the subject of more spinoffs, remakes, and adaptations than any other classical figure except possibly Hamlet: tragedies, comedies, novels, stories, operas, puppet plays, films, dances, paintings, sculptures, comic strips, biographies, social studies, political tracts, and more, from dozens of different cultures, with dozens of different ideological slants. Faust clearly touches our quintessentially modern suspicion that the way we live has been purchased with a part of our humanity, and by common agreement, he belongs to the world, not just to Germany.

Strangely enough, though, the work generally acknowledged as the most morally capacious, psychologically insightful, and politically intelligent conception in the Faust literature is an exception. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's monumental life-work—the two part *Faust*, written over six of modernity's most tumultuously definitive decades and completed in 1831 shortly before his death—is a masterpiece that happens

also to be a national chestnut. Pushkin once called it “an Iliad of modern life,” but Richard Wagner, who wanted to build a theater and found an ensemble for it, said Germans should read it like a national Bible. George Lukács spoke of it as “the simultaneous affirmation and negation of the tragic,” a consummate “drama of the human species,” yet the far less ideological Thomas Mann stressed its “folk character” and linked Goethe’s genius to that of Luther, Nietzsche and the tradition of specifically German idealism. In the 20th century, German theaters produced *Faust* practically every decade in lavish, widely attended productions, with audiences converging on it as a sort of communal confessional inviting them to brood on the shifting state of their souls. (Gustaf Gründgens dominated this history with his three productions, over 25 years, presenting Mephistopheles as the most interesting character.) Elsewhere, the work has been much more revered than played, particularly in the Anglophone world, where directors tend to find it wordy, rhetorical, and old-fashioned.

I’ve seen a handful of *Fausts* in the United States. All were competent, about three or four hours long, and based only on *Faust I*, a powerful but conventional work driven by a story of love, betrayal, and heartbreak whose outlines were as familiar when it was published in 1808 as they are today. Before 2000, I had never seen *Faust II*—a much less perishable, extraordinarily free-form product of Goethe’s middle and old age, replete with arcane allegorical references and involute interior action. For anyone who speaks German and enjoys watching the German theater throw itself extravagantly into absurdly monstrous and cerebral projects, as I do, *Faust II* is Mount Everest. The Germans perform it occasionally, always vastly shortened, and several high-profile directors (Klaus Michael Grüber, Claus Peymann, and Wolfgang Engel) have combined it with *Faust I* over the past few decades in productions that ran six to nine hours. For whatever reasons, I never got there, but Peter Stein’s 21-hour production of the entirety of both parts in Hanover in July, 2000, by contrast, had me itching to hop a plane.

The main attraction this time was Stein himself, a legendary figure who hadn’t directed in Germany since 1991 and, at 63, was fulfilling a 30-year-old dream. Stein was a co-founder of the Berlin Schaubühne and its chief creative force during its glory days in the 1970s and early 80s. He had proposed *Faust* for the theater’s initial season in 1969-70, then became

distracted by other big projects (such as *Peer Gynt* in 1971 and *The Oresteia* in 1980), and had just begun planning *Faust* again when the Schaubühne fired him in 1985. His declared ambition from that point on, which frightened nearly everyone he approached as a potential collaborator, was to produce the whole work for the first time, without cutting any of its 12,111 lines or imposing any stage action not specifically mentioned by Goethe. (Actually, an uncut *Faust* has been presented every few years since 1938 by a partly non-professional cast at the anthroposophical center called Goetheanum in Dornach, Switzerland, but Stein dismissed this effort as “cult worship” rather than theater art, saying his production was the real “world premiere” because it was the first by a wholly professional company.)

He worked assiduously to realize his titanic plan even while employed as director of non-musical theater at the Salzburg Festival from 1991 to 1997, giving public readings in various European cities and recording all of *Faust II*, solo, on a commercially released, 8-hour, 7-CD set. Only when the Hanover world’s fair Expo 2000 offered its sponsorship, which led to other large corporate and government grants, did the financing for the 30-million Mark (\$20 million) production come together. It opened as part of the fair, ran there for four months, and then fulfilled a planned two-year run in Berlin and Vienna, consistently selling out its 398-Mark (\$265) tickets a month ahead of each performance.

I was extremely curious about it even after reading the German reviews, which unanimously trashed the production for what the critics saw as its deadly literalism. Stein’s *Oresteia* had long been a pinnacle of my theatergoing, and these were many of the same critics who had detested the painstaking realism in his 1984 production of *The Three Sisters*, which I also found breathtaking. I distrusted their motives, suspecting pet theories about both Stein and Goethe. Meanwhile, Stein was belligerent. “You take this text especially seriously,” said an interviewer to him during his Hanover rehearsals. “What else?” answered the now respectable elder statesman who a few years ago was an upstart-evangelist of director’s theater. “Should I take myself seriously? No! These illustrious people who pursue director’s theater regard themselves as excessively important and aren’t exactly bursting with inspirations because of it.”

As it turned out, I was myself taken aback by the flatfootedness of the show's literalism. I also found a great deal to admire, though, as did the 460-odd Germans in the audience with me, apparently, since they all stayed to the end and carried on animated, appreciative conversations during the ten intermissions over two days. (In Hanover, one saw the production either in six evenings or over a marathon weekend, thereafter only in two-day marathons.) There is a venerable truism that all great artworks are mirrors that send people away with a version of what they came looking for. In Stein's *Faust*, I seem to have been looking for some capacious statement about the essence and promise of theater at the end of print culture. Stein didn't work from this premise, I presume, and I wasn't aware it was so pronounced in my mind until afterward. The show spoke eloquently to it, though—not only through the play itself, but also in its overtly commercial venue, in the light the production cast on the limitations of its hero-director, and in the light he did and didn't manage to cast on the totality of Goethe's conception.

Stein's *Faust* was presented by its publicists as an unthreatening, popular event—one that happened to have literary respectability but could be as much fun to attend as a circus or carnival. Its television commercials featured high-tech montages with lots of fire and acrobatic exertion, and its posters shamelessly packaged Goethe as tourist kitsch, immodestly featuring the names STEIN and FAUST (both peremptory German nouns, meaning “stone” and “fist”) adjoined in mirror image. Inevitably, Expo 2000 was also part of the attraction—a preposterously large fair stretching over hundreds of acres, with more than 150 futuristic national pavilions reflecting its theme of the bright promise of technology. *Faust* functioned as the *de facto* German cultural pavilion, assuring visitors that the brave new world of unimpeded corporate boosterism—evident everywhere in the park's sea of logos—would never leave theater or the classics behind.

The performance took place in a huge, characterless, hangar-like hall divided with black curtains into two performance areas with a corridor in between. (In Berlin, the venue was an old bus depot.) The audience moved back and forth between these spaces every 20 to 60 minutes, watching action on one side while the other side was rearranged for the following scene. This system was more democratic than most people able

to pay 398 DM for a theater ticket were probably comfortable with, but the constant to-ing and fro-ing soon became routine and was often amusing—as when the crowd arrived to find it had to stand, or when it rushed for the front rows in anticipation of scenes with nudity. The compulsory movement also created a peculiar social environment, fostering innumerable impromptu exchanges among strangers. In the “Rittersaal” scene (about two-thirds through), for instance, the audience was seated at long tables and left for ten minutes or so to chat with neighbors over individual plates of real wine and cheese.

This environment, more than anything else, colored my thoughts and impressions over the two days. I had read several intelligent articles beforehand about the meaning of *Faust* for Germans at the present cultural moment. One, by Peter Kümmel in *Die Zeit*, suggested that, although Stein was no doubt indifferent to Wagner’s dream of “the spiritual unity of the Volk,” he had nevertheless shrewdly exploited the economic boom of the late 1990s to realize Wagner’s more practical project of founding an ensemble and building a temple for “the Bible of the Germans.” (The production was registered as a for-profit corporation, with 80 employees contracted for three years.) Another essay, by Richard Herzinger in *Theater heute*, focused on “the harmonizing ending” of *Faust II*, in which the “striving” Faust is redeemed by heaven despite his sins and the fact that Mephistopheles has technically won their wager. Herzinger wrote that this redemption did have “something arbitrarily forced about it,” but it nevertheless gave the work power today as “a parable of the German happy ending”: “The unified Germany of 1989-90 was founded on the bankruptcy of delusory projects, not only nationalist but also utopian-socialist in nature. The price for the redemption of the constantly striving, endeavoring Germans is the abandonment of their high-flying fantasies of world-reclamation.”

There is truth in both these theories. I wouldn’t argue specifically with either of them. I would question their immediacy for the average spectator, however—certainly for a foreigner like me but also for ordinary Germans. *Faust* in the theater (as distinct from the classroom or the scholar’s study) is too engaging as a narrative to be primarily a forum for worship, and its story doesn’t revolve around, or issue from, its ending in any significant sense. One is pulled in, for instance, by the love story, by

pure titillation in scenes such as the Witches' Kitchen and the Walpurgisnacht, by Faust's various forms of overreaching (or "striving," if you prefer), and by the fact that he and Mephistopheles seem more and more like opposing aspects of a single, quintessentially human nature as the play goes on. Among the snatches of conversation I overheard during the many pauses between scenes were: an argument about whether Faust's blood-signature irrevocably bound him to his devil's bargain, a discussion of whether the Earth Spirit (a filmed closeup of a face surrounded by flames) was sufficiently "horrible," and whether Helen of Troy was sufficiently "glamorous." During the first day's long dinner break, two Hanoverians I'd never met before (an elderly woman and her granddaughter) fell into a remarkably sophisticated conversation with me about Mephistopheles' "scoffing" nature and its connection to the degrading trivializations of television.

For my part, I was reminded more than ever that *Faust* is basically a story about a lonely, isolated professor who yearns for a more active and erotic relationship with the outside world. He feels imprisoned in his own inwardness, having brought his knowledge, feeling and intuition to the pinnacle of refinement at the cost of his connections to everything and everyone outside them. Thus Goethe allegorizes the painful transition from the torpid, closed, and medieval "little world" (Goethe's phrase) of Margarete (Gretchen) to the more brightly dynamic, intellectually open but treacherous world of modernity. Stein's most significant achievement was to apply this modernity effectively to our time, dramatizing the transition to the age of shrinking attention spans, disappearing language faculties, and mass isolation behind flickering screens. For much of the marathon audience, the production's social immersion—21 hours of jostling actual, unpredictable, sensually engaged comrades in an intellectually aroused crowd—was probably as novel and disorienting as Faust's.

Any fair-minded observer would concede that the German critics were justified in many of their practical, scene-by-scene objections. The settings (designed by Ferdinand Wögerbauer for Part I and by Stefan Mayer for Part II) were restrained and cautious to a fault. Most scenes were played in unremarkably conventional or generic environments, and several were inexplicably stuffed into bizarrely cramped compartments or spread out in open areas dully and sparsely adorned. The occasional

touches of modernism—a varicolored, climbable cliff-face during the Walpurgisnacht, for instance, and a truncated pyramid with magnetic trees, human figures and other shapes moved around by actors during the Classical Walpurgisnacht—seemed passive and merely decorative. Heinrich Brunke's dynamic lighting often felt like a compensation for visual inertness. Now and then, one could perceive a plan to chart an expansive journey outward from Faust's claustrophobic, Kafkaesque study, with its tall, dusty shelves crammed full of old tomes, reams and scrolls of paper, to arenas of greater and greater airiness and light, but this wasn't consistently followed. Moidele Bickel's costumes were inert, unimaginative: standard Goethe-era garb supplemented by fantasy-outfits straight out of commonplace storybooks, with only rare blips of assertive originality (such as a rolling-metal-cart hind-quarter for the centaur Chiron).

A few scenes were exceptionally designed. At the end of Part I, for instance, Gretchen was incarcerated in a cubic metal cage too small for her to stand or fully stretch out in. In Act II of Part II, actors on a conveyor belt used roller blades to create the impression of swimming. And at the end of Part II, Faust's heavenly redemption was depicted with droll magnificence as a sort of sacred abduction by aliens: a giant metallic spiral walkway descended from the ceiling and angels dressed in clinical white helped Faust remove his actor's makeup and clothes and then escorted him slowly upward, flanked by nearly naked boys of decreasing age. Fundamentally, however, Stein clearly made a decision to abandon interpretively active and challenging modern stage design—used so stunningly in all his previous productions—as if anything less than pure literalism would have smudged the figurative vitrine he thought to construct around his tome of beloved old words.

His choices were sometimes plainly ridiculous and amateurish: having Mephistopheles step out from behind two 15-foot-tall, bright red boots when the text says that he alights from “seven-league boots,” for instance, or bringing a real black poodle onstage when Mephistopheles is said to enter as one. Furthermore—and this is a weightier matter—he didn't prove his main premise: that the entirety of *Faust* possesses a deep momentum and grand aesthetic arc in performance that benighted theater people have overlooked for nearly two centuries. Major sections of *Faust II* (his main reason for doing the production, he said) appeared superfluous

in theatrical terms, just as previous directors said they were. The hour-long carnival that Mephisto stages at the Emperor's palace, for example—staged here by Stein as a tumultuous parade of monotonous, sparkling kitsch—came off as an obscure, tedious, and dated satire. Similarly, the fourth act of Part II—with its stereotypical thugs and its battle on a mountain spur that takes place entirely offstage while the principals chat and watch—was left to wallow in its own dramatic torpor.

This flagrant failure of imagination aside, however (and notwithstanding Stein's crass publicity blitz), there is also a sense in which the production benefited from low expectations—especially in Hanover. Bruno Ganz, the 59-year-old actor around whom the role of Faust was built, could not perform in Hanover because he had seriously injured himself in rehearsal. In his place appeared Christian Nickel, a 31-year-old actor who was supposed to share the role (playing the rejuvenated lover of Gretchen, for instance) but who instead performed the entire show. One had to sympathize with Nickel, thrust as he was into an impossible mission. Neither vocally engaging nor physically spectacular, he was competent, flexible and sometimes genuinely moving. The surprise was that he became considerably more than that in the end, simply by being a more or less neutral and efficient conduit to Goethe.

Six months later, I saw Ganz's performance when it was broadcast on German television (he had returned to the role in Berlin). As might be expected, he added heft, gravity, realism, variety, and maturity to Faust. Furthermore, because Nickel blossomed under his lighter burden, the alternations and combinations of the two actors seemed interesting and illuminating. Because of Ganz's ability to add virtuosic "star turns," however—his desperate exasperation and self-loathing leading up to Faust's suicide attempt, for instance, and his leering, gummy grins while gazing on the Walpurgisnacht orgy—he also sometimes stood in competition with the words. He was never gratuitously self-indulgent, but he did assert a specific and forceful presence. With Nickel alone, by contrast, one had no thoughts of either fireworks or incompetence and thus sat back to relax into wave upon wave of rhymed eloquence about human appetite, fulfillment, disappointment, and despair.

Interestingly enough, the portrayal of Mephistopheles added to this impression. This role was also shared by two fine actors, Johann Adam

Oest and Robert Hunger-Bühler, who seemed clearly and significantly differentiated at first: one was droopy-eyed, languorous, and seductive, the other worried, weary, and weatherbeaten. As the production went on, though, they grew less and less distinguishable, and by the end their contrast hardly seemed important. For that matter, only two other actors stood out amidst the production's 600-plus roles played by the 33-member company: Dorothee Hartinger as the superbly restless Gretchen, and Corinna Kirchhoff as the wonderfully vain Helen of Troy. Everyone else blended so effectively and anonymously into the choral background that I wondered afterward how Stein convinced them to devote three years of their careers to this project.

All the German critics complained about the show's long boring sections, and on one level they were right, but on another I think they missed the point. A certain quotient of boredom was necessary to abate the appetite for spectacle. As often happens in Beckett, the boredom drew one into an expansive *listening* posture whereby the literalism became a cradle for the deceptively "artless" art of the poetry (that famous verse in which, as Thomas Mann said, "every sort of high-flownness, every poetic extravagance, is foreign . . . [yet it] keeps on the middle path with a quiet masterly boldness").

A particularly chilling moment, for instance, was Mephistopheles' mocking lament for life's transitoriness late in Part II.

*Was soll uns denn das ew'ge Schaffen!
Geschaffenes zu nichts hinwegzuraffen!
"Da ist's vorbei!" Was ist daran zu lesen?
Es ist so gut, als wär' es nicht gewesen . . .*

(Then what's the use of eternally striving,
When all that's created is swept away to nothing!
"There, it's over!" What's to be learned from that?
It's just as good as if it never were ...)

I have no memory whatever of which actor delivered these lines, or which expressions and intonations he used. I do remember perfectly, however, how after 20 hours or so, my mind had settled into a state of intense

concentration on ideas and their formulation, on the wit, elegance, fluidity, and curiously timeless life of Goethe's words. During a passage like this, Beckett—with his lifelong theme of futile striving married to not-quite-final renunciation—seemed as much a precedent for Goethe as an heir to him. The hierarchy of real chronology was irrelevant. Especially with the magnificent metal spiral descending from the ceiling, I felt transported to one of those circular timespaces of Borges where Kafka influences Hawthorne, where Racine and Mallarmé count as "the same writer," and the very notion of confident orientation is a hallucinatory dream.

Stein's key perception in *Faust* was the need to preserve this atmosphere of the greatest possible openness to wide-roaming reverie, even at the risk of seeming to abdicate his directorial duties. No one could ever accuse this director of excessive humility, but he does seem to have understood that, with this play, at this time, he couldn't present himself as an omniscient hero bearing definitive answers. For all his bravado and self-promotion, he grasped that monumentalism itself is now suspect, even though millions are still drawn to it, and that the public today prefers its idols to have clay feet. Hence the anomalous triumph of a director, and a Faust, in whom megalomania dances with caution and humility: neither Übermensch, nor even Übermensch-wannabe, but rather a striving, bungling, overcommitted man of the earth.