

Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature

Volume 48
Issue 1 *Translating Multilingualism*

Article 12

2024

Martin Kagel and David Z. Saltz, editors. Open Wounds. Holocaust Theater and the Legacy of George Tabori. University of Michigan Press, 2022.

Janine Wulz
University of Victoria, janine.wulz@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/sttcl>



Part of the [German Literature Commons](#), and the [Modern Literature Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

Recommended Citation

Wulz, Janine (2024) "Martin Kagel and David Z. Saltz, editors. Open Wounds. Holocaust Theater and the Legacy of George Tabori. University of Michigan Press, 2022.," *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*: Vol. 48: Iss. 1, Article 12. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.2263>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature* by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

Martin Kagel and David Z. Saltz, editors. *Open Wounds. Holocaust Theater and the Legacy of George Tabori*. University of Michigan Press, 2022.

Abstract

Review of Martin Kagel and David Z. Saltz, editors. *Open Wounds. Holocaust Theater and the Legacy of George Tabori*. University of Michigan Press, 2022.

Keywords

review, Holocaust, theater

Martin Kagel and David Z. Saltz, editors. *Open Wounds. Holocaust Theater and the Legacy of George Tabori*. University of Michigan Press, 2022.

George Tabori is one of the great names in the world of theatre in German-speaking countries. His works as a playwright, director, and artist were performed at the most renowned theaters in Vienna and Berlin since the 1970s and are still to be seen on stage. George Tabori's supposedly most recited and acclaimed work *Mein Kampf* (premiered 1987 at the *Akademietheater* in Vienna) could be seen on stage at the famous *Burgtheater* in Vienna in spring 2023.

George Tabori lived a remarkable life. He emigrated in 1932 to Germany and 1935 to London, where he became a journalist with stations in Istanbul, Sofia, and Palestine. In 1947 he moved to the US, where he would work as a playwright in Hollywood and meet other famous exiles such as Berthold Brecht, who became a major influence for his work. During the 1950s, Tabori moved to New York, where the topic of the Holocaust as a subject of his theater gradually emerged, starting with the 1952 premiered piece *Flight to Egypt* and in his adaptations of Brecht's writings, as in *Brecht on Brecht* (1961). In the 1970s, Tabori moves to Germany where his work centers around the Holocaust and coming to terms with his own history as a Hungarian Jew who survived the Holocaust in exile while his father was murdered in Auschwitz. His plays, such as *The Cannibals* (1968) or *Mein Kampf*, were unsettling to German-speaking audiences at a time when the perpetrators were still very much alive and found themselves often again respected members of society.

The volume edited by Martin Kagel and David Z. Saltz followed an international conference on *George Tabori and the Theatre of the Holocaust* at the University of Georgia in 2015. It aims to explore George Tabori's legacy more than a decade after his death in 2007. Starting with Anat Feinberg's chapter revisiting George Tabori, the reader finds themselves diving into the world of the playwright and director. It feels like getting to know Tabori piece by piece: as a political actor who reflected ongoing and past social injustices in his work, as a Jew coming to terms with his identity and bringing the Holocaust to the stage, and as an artist experimenting with new forms of acting, as within his *Theaterlabor*, influenced by avantgarde theater and Gestalt therapy.

The breaking of taboos and the creation of a physical experience that is nearly unbearable for spectators to witness are main elements in Tabori's Holocaust theater. Alice Le Trionnaire-Bolterauer's article examines the sacrificial ritual in Tabori's plays, most notably in the crucifixion of the Auschwitz prisoner Goldberg in *The Goldberg-Variations* or the questions revolving around morality, survival, and sacrifice when concentration camp prisoners discuss whether eating of another inmates' flesh is considered inhumane in a system of inhumanity in *The Cannibals*.

While Tabori's plays deal with the Holocaust, trauma, and memory, his work is often described as comedy or farce. As Rebecca Rovit outlines, he juxtaposes the past with the present, creates incongruous situations, and employs humor as distancing mechanisms, making the audience laugh and cringing at their complicity in laughing at the serious subject at the same time. The absurdity of the meeting of Hitler and a Jew, Shlomo Herzl, in a homeless asylum in Vienna does exactly that: it makes us laugh and cringe at the same time. The farce *Mein Kampf*, one of Tabori's most recognized plays, breaks taboos and forces the audience to face the ethical question of whether it is acceptable to use Hitler to provoke laughter, as Peter Höyng writes in his chapter. By analyzing the 2009 film adaptation of the play by Swiss director Urs Odermatt, Höyng develops an analytical tool for understanding Tabori's Holocaust theater. The five proposed maxims of Tabori's memory games state that he (1) is more concerned with representation informed by history than historical representation, (2) questions history beyond master narratives, (3) creates counternarratives by serious, playful arrangements, (4) employs humor as a form to break through the constraints of taboo without fully leaving behind consciousness, and (5) induces laughter by not only dark humor but also the grotesque. While the maxims could be discussed in more detail, they provide an extremely helpful overview for understanding Tabori's work, and would have been helpful to read at the beginning rather than almost at the end of the volume.

One strength of the volume are the chapters showing the extensive breadth and influence of Tabori's work. Klaus van der Berg explores how Tabori's methods opened room for performance illuminations in Shakespeare's work, most notably in adapting *The Merchant of Venice* as a response to the Shoah. Rebecca Rovit brings Tabori's work in conversation with other artists aiming for expressing the inexpressible nature of the Shoah, and Jack Davis discusses the genealogical relation of René Pollesch's *Cappuccetto Rosso* (2005) with Tabori's Holocaust theater. The book ends with Barbara Wallace Grossmann's critical analysis of Holocaust.

The volume edited by Kagel and Saltz is an adventurous exploration of Tabori's Holocaust theater. It enables the reader to get to know Tabori's life and work from multiple perspectives and become an admirer of his ability to put the finger where it hurts, to make the audience laugh and cringe at the same time, and to make sure no one can unsee the open wounds shown in his plays. At a time where antisemitism and hate crimes are growing threats to many in our society, his work remains sadly relevant and timely.

Janine Wulz
University of Victoria