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Fanny Janauschek: Bohemian on a New World Stage

I had come early and was talking to her stage manager on stage, when Miss Janauschek appeared. All my illusions were threatened at once. This old, shrivelled and breathless person . . . with thick spectacles was the 'famous Fanny' about to portray Mary Stuart! When she stepped out of the dressing room later, in make-up and costume, I was somewhat consoled. As soon as she had stepped onto the set, speaking her first lines, she became the great actress and I forgot my disappointment. What I saw now was the ideal personification of Schiller's unhappy queen of Scots.¹

Fanny Janauschek, whom contemporaries had hailed "Queen of Tragedy" for several decades, died in Brooklyn in 1904 in dire poverty.² Her career in the United States had begun with a much lauded performance of Franz Grillparzer's *Medea*, in German, to German audiences at the Academy of Music in New York in the fall of 1867.³ Her reputation as one of Europe's great tragediennes prepared the way for what promised to become an even greater achievement of fine artistry on the New World stage. Janauschek's American career, however, shows in retrospect the gruelling demands made on the physical and mental resources of an aging actress touring and working in the theatre in the latter part of the nineteenth century.⁴

As her promoters and managers would have it, Francesca Romana Magdalena Janauschek was born 20 July 1830 to a wealthy Prague merchant and his wife, and enjoyed a happy childhood until her mother's death, after which "manifold misfortunes befell the family." From sketchy German sources, however, we can glimpse a bleaker beginning. One continental historian who gave her birthday as 20 July 1829 stated that "her father was a taylor and her mother a laundry maid in the theatre." The Janauscheks, as Fanny would later emphasize repeatedly in American interviews, were of "pure Czech blood."

Her entrance into the corps de ballet of the Ständetheater at Prague at an early age, certainly several years before her ninth birthday,

indicates that the family was of meager means. A wealthy merchant's daughter would not have been permitted the peculiar privilege to dance professionally during childhood. It is more likely that Fanny, one of nine children, was placed into the working world of her mother, where an artistic career promised escape from ethnic and socio-economic restrictions.⁸

Bohemian affairs had been marked for centuries by tension and conflict between three major ethnic groups. "Czechs and Germans mistreated each other and, together, mistreated the Jews." During the last decades of the eighteenth century, Prague's theatres began to reflect the national cleavages of Bohemian society. Several Czech-language theatre efforts were underway, attempting the separation from "the German mother institution." In an unabashed ethnocentric chronicle of Bohemian theatre affairs, nineteenth-century German theatre historian Oscar Teuber emphasized that the Ständetheater remained a monument to German national culture, "a solely German institution." We may wonder what this meant for Fanny and her mother.

The peculiar stories about Fanny's beginnings tend to gloss over, indeed remake, her years of preparation for a theatrical career. Persistently, Janauschek is featured as an aspiring, gifted piano student who, unfortunately, suffered an accident, a severe cutting of her hand, and consequently had to give up the prospect of a concert career. Even her obituary referred to the misfortune which "of course, put an end to all her prospects of becoming a professional pianist, but as she possessed a mezzo-soprano voice of considerable promise, she began to study for the operatic stage at the Prague Conservatory."

We shall have an opportunity to examine this "accident" in a different context later. That Fanny was a student at the Prague Conservatory cannot be validated. In Teuber's version of her professional

training:

The young member of the ballet betrayed early an inclination toward something loftier, recited verses at home with relish and enjoyed nothing more than visiting the theatre's spoken drama. When her mother discovered her passion, she entrusted it to the care of Primadonna Mad. Podhorsky and asked for advice. She, in turn, did not refuse her attention and coached young Janauschek in a not too difficult role. Director Ernst, with the approval of [artistic manager] Stoger allowed a trial performance, which, however small a debut, gained the fourteen or fifteen year old Fanny some favorable attention and audience applause. ¹³

The account, written after Janauschek had become well known in the German theatre, creates a rather idyllic picture of the Ständetheater "family" with young Fanny, appropriately, aided in her first artistic attempts by a motherly teacher, then "allowed" to perform in public with the blessing of a fatherly management. We have it from other sources that her mother died when Fanny was nine years of age. 14 It is not clear when and why Janauschek became an actress. We may infer

from later statements by her and her promoters that she tried to become a singer, and that her attempts were frustrated by her social and ethnic status. The Prague Conservatory, one of the first and supposedly best music schools in the German language realm during Fanny's years at the Ständetheater, was a philanthropic project for theatre-loving German aristocrats. To enter, one needed patronage and connections. Teuber closed his chronicle of Fanny's training stating that "the character actor Baudius took over her further education after auditions for the concert master of the Ständetheater opera proved that Fanny had no talent for opera."

The date of her first appearance as an actress has been consistently given as 17 July 1845. She played two roles, "Caroline von Biberstein" in *Ich bleibe ledig* and "the actress" in *Komm her*. Thus typed as an ingénue in light comedy, she pleased her critics with a "natural tone," "uninhibited stage movement," and "a pleasing speaking voice." Her inauspicious debut gives us no clue about her departure from Prague soon thereafter. Fanny left the Ständetheater at the age of fifteen or sixteen for Leipzig. She was, however, unsuccessful in gaining entrance into Leipzig theatre circles and, penniless, left for smaller stages. Her

Wanderjahre had begun.

The mountainous region of Saxony where she spent two years among starving miners and impoverished artisans proved to be an inhospitable environment for her aspirations to pursue a theatrical career. Allegedly, she wandered from small town to small town, giving performances with another young woman, adding to her income by making and selling artificial flowers. At a small theatre in Annaberg, she found a short-time engagement with a company managed by a ''Direktor Tietze.'' She earned twenty-four *Thaler* a month.¹⁷

In 1847, she auditioned in Heilbronn, Württemberg, and secured there a seasonal contract with the Ringelmann company. German theatre historians differ in their accounts of Janauschek's professional work after Heilbronn. The demise of the Ringelmann company forced the actress again to find employment. Supposedly, she played in

Cologne in 1847, then in Aachen during the same year. 18

Before she came to Frankfurt in 1848, Janauschek was said to have acquired the patronage of several important directors and playwrights. In Heilbronn, Justinus Kerner, in Cologne, Roderick Benedix, and in Aachen a director Gerlach supposedly recognized the actress' talent and came to promote it. ¹⁹ At the most, these associations proved temporary. There is no indication that Janauschek herself attributed her start in German theatre to the influence of these men.

In February 1848, she played "Gretchen" (Faust) at Frankfurt, as a guest. This performance brought her a regular engagement with the Frankfurt theatre, which she began in May of the same year. In Frankfurt, Janauschek began her transformation from Bohemian ingénue to German character actress. At first, she continued to play roles that came mostly from the standard contemporary repertoire. Eduard Devrient recorded in his diary: "I traveled to Frankfurt at ten o'clock. Saw there in the theatre a production of 'Nähkätchen'... Miss

Janauschek was quite nice, natural, and of womanly dignity.''²⁰ On 28 August 1849 Fanny played lead in *Iphigenie* at the occasion of Frankfurt's Goethe celebration. The critics enthusiastically proclaimed her to be a new star of the German theatre.

She was praised to show a performance style similar to Rachel's:

Her acting which highlights certain dramatic climaxes in roles has definitely something of the manner of the French tragedienne [Rachel]. Not only in the gestural part, but also from an inner core does her playing reveal a masterful majesty. In her historical characters she shows not only artistic and psychological truth but also historical truthfulness.²¹

It is difficult to take from such description much more than a critic's admission that Janauschek performed with authority and commitment.

Twelve years in Frankfurt gave her the opportunity to incorporate into her repertoire the major roles of classic European dramatic literature. She played ''Gretchen'' (Faust), ''Leonore'' (Tasso), ''Klärchen'' (Egmont), ''Jungfrau'' (Jungfrau von Orleans), ''Maria Stuart'' (Maria Stuart), ''Isabella'' (Braut von Messina), and several other roles.²² In November 1858, Janauschek apparently had a dispute with the Frankfurt management. Devrient received a letter from her, upon which he made the following entry in his diary:

Miss Janauschek is seeking my objective assessment about her refusal to play ''Isabella'' in *Braut von Messina*, which the management justly demands of her. She deems it fair to ask me to support her. She will be quite surprised over the letter that I wrote her, namely, telling her that she is professionally and artistically wrong . . . Miss Janauschek responded nicely that she would do what I had advised her to do. It is lovely that I have such influence even from afar.²³

Janauschek, after obliging the Frankfurt management and the influential Devrient, nevertheless decided in 1861 to leave the security of her Frankfurt engagement to perform only as guest star. Before her departure from Frankfurt she published a brochure for the theatre management entitled *Illustrationen der neuesten Geschichte des Frankfurter Theaters unter der Leitung des Herrn von Guaita*.²⁴

She appeared in Weimar during the fall of 1861, then left for Dresden, where she spent almost a year, and went to Vienna in 1863. While in Weimar, she was painted by Arnold Böcklin. It is through this painting that the story about the accident which supposedly caused Janauschek to give up a concert career gains some significance.

Böcklin broke with the tradition of painting actors in a specific role and in costume by portraying Janauschek as a lady in mourning. It was the year in which the painter's mother had died. In the painting Janauschek stands against a barely opened door, her face turned away from the light, in a strangely resigned stance, faintly smiling. "The lady in black" seems caught in a moment of admitted vulnerability, of indecision. Curiously, the otherwise completed painting shows Janauschek's hands, especially her right one, barely outlined by the painter's

brush. Both hands seem large and fleshy. We do not know whether Böcklin did not complete her hands because he perceived them to be flawed or whether Janauschek asked for a specific "treatment" of her hands, which the painter refused (and, consequently, left the task

incomplete altogether).

Böcklin supposedly said of Janauschek to a theatre colleague that she had been "eine böse Person." Janauschek later admitted that she did not like the painting. As an actress, she had reason to object to the painter's personal view of her. She may well have been disappointed that Böcklin's interpretation did not permit a theatrical pose and that she did not appear in one of her great roles on the canvas as she had on stage. Self-conscious also about her appearance, she had reason to object to a naturalistic portrayal of certain features which she considered flawed. Folkloric tradition has it that "the hands give it away." Janauschek, in America, was almost compulsive about pointing out that she had connections with Europe's aristocracy, and that she had received the best in education and training that the Old World had to offer. The painting made her "simpler" than she cared to appear.

For almost a decade, Janauschek toured in Germany as a guest artist. During this time she collected her share of great critical successes as well as failures. Seeing her in a contemporary drama, Heinrich Laube recorded that "Miss Janauschek did not live up to expectations."²⁶

Independent actresses in Germany during Janauschek's years faced a number of hardships that did not beset their male colleagues. Even as stars, they seldom acquired a secure financial base. Actresses were required to own their wardrobes and replenish them for each production as directors saw fit. Audience tastes tended to favor splendid costuming, and actresses had to oblige the demands for rich attires and jewelry. Actresses in Germany were fired or not rehired if they became pregnant. Theatre directors discouraged and in some cases forbade marriage.²⁷

The number of women entering the stage profession in the second half of the nineteenth century far exceeded the number of positions available in the German standing and traveling companies. The competition was fierce, rewards were always uncertain, and the whims and wishes of theatre-bureaucrats and director-managers often outrageous. To a beginning actress, applying for an engagement, one director replied

in writing:

My dear miss, I cannot offer you but 35 Rubel for the month but you should join us, nevertheless. We have here many well-to-do gentlemen, so you will have an amusing time, to be sure.²⁸

It is reasonable to suggest that Fanny Janauschek came to the United States because she did not succeed in securing a position of preeminence among her German contemporaries. In 1867, she became manager and leading actress for a troupe that had gathered for the purpose of preparing a tour in the United States.²⁹ Once in New York, she found a German audience willing to accept her with enthusiasm. Max Ma-

retzek directed her as "Medea" at the Academy of Music and then took her on tour with stops at the major German-language theatres in the United States.

In Milwaukee she appeared with her own company in March 1868, "the first European guest of renown" to give five performances. She played "Maria Stuart," "Adrienne Lecouvreur," "Medea," "Deborah," and "Thusnelda." In November of the same year, Janauschek appeared as Racine's "Phaedra," Schiller's "Isabella" and Goethe's "Iphigenie." In Cincinnati, during the spring of 1869, Janauschek starred as "Deborah" and "created such enthusiasm for her passionate performance of the title role as had never before occurred in the history of Cincinnati's theatre."

One of her first reviews in the United States, a response to her performance in German of "Medea," stated

Mlle. Janauschek has a handsome figure and a sumptuous presence, aided by features that are in every sense expressive. There is less dignity, less reserve and more humanity, more of the woman, in her 'Medea' than in Ristori's, but this is justified by Grillparzer, who shows no less of that sad one's heroism than her weakness. Mlle. Janauschek, however, has applied a deal of close study to the character, and develops every phase of it thoroughly. German acting does not rely at all upon 'points,' and many passages which on our stage, and even in the Italian drama, would be specifically made to stand out, fell into the ranks of even declamation last night. This was particularly noticeable in 'Medea's' meeting with 'Creusa.' This conscientious scruple of the German artist is apt to make a performance sometimes monotonous. A human tenderness blending with an Eastern picturesqueness of gesture, and a refined sentiment prominent throughout every scene were the remarkable features of Mlle. Janauschek's 'Medea'—and saved her impersonation at all events from wearying anyone.32

During her first visit, in the winter of 1868, "she appeared in polyglot performances, playing in German, Lady Macbeth to Booth's Macbeth, while the other members of the company spoke English." In an interview before that performance, she voiced her intention to study English in order to act in American theatres. Before she settled permanently in the United States, she returned once more to Germany for the 1872-73 season. Apparently she felt it necessary to prepare for a New World career with intensive language study. Her first performance in English ("Deborah," on 10 October 1870 at the Academy of Music) had not satisfied her.

Critics pointed out repeatedly that she spoke English with a strong gutteral accent, "but with sufficient clearness and admirable emphasis." For her American colleagues, her accent and her appearance remained an occasion for anecdote or ridicule. She was for them an exotic star-actress, as this recollection by Otis Skinner reveals:

I had not encountered the tragedienne until I met her on the scene—her rehearsals having been conducted by her stage manager. As "Seyton" in Macbeth I entered to announce the coming of "King Duncan" and was instructed to wait my speech until "Lady Macbeth" demanded my news. Madam's massive back was toward me, her gaze fixed on "Macbeth's" letter, and she showed no recognition of my presence. I blurted out, "The King comes here to-night." Thereat she whirled like an enraged tiger, her eyes two fiery search-lights, and with a deep vibrato thundered out: "How now, sirrah, vot noos?" With wilting legs I reiterated my speech and retired clammy. Her eyes had given me a distinct electric shock.³⁶

From 1873 through 1892, Janauschek toured the United States. During the first decade and a half of her American career she managed to play a predominantly classic repertoire. One of her greatest successes was the double role "Lady Dedlock" and "Hortense" in *Bleak House*.³⁷

She insisted that acting should be considered an art form and, for some years, succeeded in persuading her colleagues and audiences that the theatre was a place for serious and committed exploration of the literary drama. The Boston Park Theatre management announced her engagement to play in *Bleak House* in 1882 with the following congratulatory introduction:

A lack of appreciation of the sterling genius and faithful endeavors of this artiste betokens an abnegation of the power to recognize the very best upon our stage today. For now over a half score of years Janauschek had held firmly, and without the slightest displacement, the very foremost station upon the stage as an exponent of heroic roles, and those characterizations which call for widely-varied intellectual and dramatic powers. Since she first seized upon this high position by absolute force of her ability, she has never descended to a lower rung upon the ladder of histrionic fame, and today, as her present engagement here shows, the desire to witness her splendid representations is daily increasing.³⁸

To Philip Hale, Janauschek "reached her zenith about 1887 as Brunhilde." By this time, however, she had been forced to add several roles in melodrama to her repertoire and had resorted to publicity practices which showed her growing panic over losing her audience appeal. She began to exhibit her jewelry in conjunction with her performances, claiming some pieces to have been the gifts of kings and princes in Europe. She felt compelled to point out in interviews that she voluntarily played older roles. Her appearance as "Meg Merrilies" she regarded "as a business mistake, because she allowed herself to be identified with the part, and thus gave the public the idea that she was really a very old woman."

Janauschek was openly critical of the predominance of melodrama on American stages. She was keenly aware, however, of the problem of finding dramas which were accessible to a great variety of theatergoers in America. She tried her talents as producer, she lectured on theatre, and relentlessly exhorted the public to become more demanding in its expectations concerning theatrical entertainment. She became more and more exasperated with American tastes for "frivolity and shallowness, absurdity and foolishness, stupidity and giddiness, and any amount of vulgarity; void of all natural sentiment and ideal perception . . . of all

and every poetical fancy."42

By the late 1880s, her exasperation was expressing itself in tirades and tantrums. She began to fight a losing battle for the appreciation of American audiences. Her stateliness had turned to massiveness, her brooding anger had changed to bitterness. She was finally forced to perform in vaudeville, because she needed money. It was not by her choice, as one of her American chroniclers suggested, that:

She made remarkable displays of varied abilities in wretched pieces whose absurdities not even her genius could mitigate. A concoction called "The Doctor of Lima" was a perfect miracle of ineptitude, but the pathos with which she filled her own part was supreme. While she was on stage the audience was sympathetic and tearful; when she was 'off' it was shaken with irreverent laughter.⁴³

One of her last efforts to force the issue of the serious literary vehicle versus the drama "void of all and every poetical fancy" ended as a minor scandal. Probably as part of a variety show, "she enacted Jacques in a freakish feminine performance of 'As You Like It," and—in spite of an appalling and ludicrous make-up—she stirred a bored audience to genuine enthusiasm by her fine reading of the part."

Janauschek announced her retirement from the stage in 1890, only to reemerge the next year to appear in *The Harvest Home*. That production was a complete failure. Her last legitimate stage performance was as 'typical Eastside 'fence' keeper' in *The Great Diamond Robbery* during

the 1895-96 season.45

On 18 July 1900 she suffered a stroke. Her obituary accounts for her last years:

[After her stroke] she went to St. Mary's Hospital, in New York, remaining there until December, 1900, and then went to live at the home of Mrs. Aston in Saratoga, N.Y., under the care of Dr. James E. Kelly, of that place. A benefit performance at Wallack's Theatre, in which many prominent actors and actresses took part, on April 12, 1901, netted \$5,000.00 for her. In October, 1903, she decided to sell her effects, consisting of costumes she had worn in her former productions. Then a relief fund was started for her and later the Actor's Fund induced her to go to its home on Staten Island.

Mme. Janauschek died November 28, 1904, at the Brunswick Home, Amityville, L.I., N.Y. Funeral services were held at No. 241 West Twenty-third Street, New York. Internment was in the Actor's Fund plot, Evergreens Cemetery, Brooklyn, N.Y.⁴⁶

Janauschek's acting, for American tastes, lacked "immediacy," that is, it showed considerable technique and artfulness. Her acting style, from what we can see in her portraits and construct from descriptions,

was based on carefully thought out arrangements in stage space. It was a dramatic text that determined her decisions on how to show herself and she approached the text with eager curiousity and unsentimental

intelligence.

Yet, as a working actress since early childhood, Janauschek had neither the leisure nor the educational equipment to develop a concept of performance art that could accommodate her experience as Bohemian, as German, as American and as woman. During a lifetime in which the theatre was shaped, on the Continent and in America, by commercial interests and the values of a boisterous, emerging bourgoisie, Janauschek's sensitivity and intelligence was oddly overwhelmed by contemporary trends and fashions. From her combative attitude, from her insistence to be a serious artist in the theatre of her time, we may glimpse the strains and strictures of an historical predicament and the heroic efforts of a woman to come to grips with the confusing demands of traditions as varied as the ones that happened to shape her individual fate.

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Notes

¹ Ludwig F. Lafrentz, "Deutsch-Texanische Theater Reminiscenzen," Deutsch-Texanische Monatshefte 5, no. 12 (1900): 186.

² See also: Jerry Vincent Cortez, "Fanny Janauschek: America's Last Queen of

Tragedy" (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1973).

³ Fritz A. H. Leuchs, *The Early German Theatre in New York* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1928), 155.

⁴ See also: Garff B. Wilson, A History of American Acting (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966), 58.

⁵ Friedrich Johann von Reden-Esbeck, Deutsches Bühnen-Lexicon (Eichstätt und Stuttgart: Verlag der Krull'schen Buchhandlung, 1879), 471.

⁶ Ludwig Eisenberg, Groβes Biographisches Lexicon der Deutschen Bühne im XIX. Jahrhundert (Leipzig: Verlagsbuchhandlung Paul List, 1903), 471.

⁷ Interview clipping in the Theatre Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University.
⁸ German sources gloss over Janauschek's childhood and often do not mention her Czech background.

9 See also: Oskar Schürer, Prag: Kultur, Kunst, Geschichte (Wien: Verlag Dr. Rolf Passer, 1935), 311-51.

¹⁰ Oscar Teuber, Geschichte des Prager Theaters (Prag: Druck und Verlag der k. k. Hofbuchdruckerei A. Haase, 1888), 3:xiii.

11 Ibid., xiv.

 12 Janauschek obit. N.Y.D.M. 10 December 1904, in the Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York, NY.

13 Teuber, Geschichte, 246-47.

¹⁴ Clippings in the Theatre Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

15 Teuber, Geschichte, 247.

16 Ibid., 247-48.

¹⁷ Reden-Esbeck, Deutsches Bühnen-Lexicon, 315.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid., 315-16.

- ²⁰ Eduard Devrient, Aus Seinen Tagebüchern: Karlsruhe 1852-1870 (Weimar: Hermann Böhlaus Nachfolger, 1964), 17.
 - ²¹ Eisenberg, Groβes Biographisches Lexicon, 471.
 - 22 Ibid.
 - ²³ Devrient, Aus Seinen Tagebüchern, 293.
 - ²⁴ Reden-Esbeck, Deutsches Bühnen-Lexicon, 316.
- ²⁵ Rolf Andree, Arnold Böcklin—Die Gemälde (Basel: Friedrich Reinhard Verlag, 1977), 254.
- ²⁶ Alexander von Weilen, Charlotte Birch-Pfeiffer und Heinrich Laube im Briefwechsel (Berlin: Selbstverlag der Gesellschaft für Theatergeschichte, 1917), 129.
- ²⁷ Gisela Schwanbeck, Sozialprobleme der Schauspielerin im Ablauf dreier Jahrhunderte (Berlin-Dahlem: Colloquium Verlag Otto H. Hess, 1957), 77-81.
 - 28 Ibid.
 - ²⁹ Reden-Esbeck, Deutsches Bühnen-Lexicon, 316.
- ³⁰ John C. Andressohn, ''Die literarische Geschichte des Milwaukeer deutschen Bühnenwesens, 1850-1911,'' German American Annals 10 (1912): 78.
- ³¹ Ralph Wood, "Geschichte des deutschen Theaters von Cincinnati," Deutsch Amerikanische Geschichtsblätter (1932): 21.
- ³² George C. D. Odell, *Annals of the New York Stage* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936), 8:345.
- ³³ Philip Hale, "Mme. Janauschek," in *Famous American Actors of To-Day*, ed. F. E. McKay and C. E. L. Wingate (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1896), 1:19.
 - ³⁴ Reden-Esbeck, Deutsches Bühnen-Lexicon, 316.
- ³⁵ John Ranken Towse, Sixty Years of the Theatre (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1916), 210.
 - ³⁶ Otis Skinner, Footlights and Spotlights (New York: Blue Ribbon Books, 1924), 62.
 - 37 Hale, "Mme. Janauschek," 23.
 - ³⁸ Playbill for *Bleak House*, Park Theatre, 13 to 18 February 1882.
 - ³⁹ Hale, "Mme. Janauschek," 20.
 - ⁴⁰ Lafrentz, "Deutsch-Texanische Theater Reminiscenzen," 186.
 - ⁴¹ Hale, "Mme. Janauschek," 19-20.
 - 42 Ibid., 22.
 - ⁴³ Towse, Sixty Years of the Theatre, 212-13.
 - 44 Ibid.
 - 45 Hale, "Mme. Janauschek," 19-25.
 - 46 Janauschek obit. N.Y.D.M.