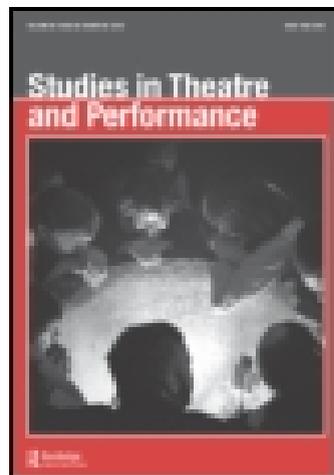


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Karl Valentin's 'Father and Son Discuss the War'

Oliver Double and Michael Wilson

Abstract

The authors have collaborated for a number of years on researching the cabaret career of Karl Valentin. Here they provide a brief summary of Valentin's active life as a preface to their translation of one of his last cabaret sketches.

Karl Valentin's post-war career

World War II was not kind to the Munich cabaret artist Karl Valentin. Unable to envisage a life away from his homeland, Valentin rejected the life of the exile and instead chose to remain in Germany where he found a fragile accommodation with the Nazi authorities. Even so, performing became increasingly difficult for Valentin, and from 1942 he gave no live performances. So when the war ended, the comedian was 'optimistic, as he has seldom been before in his life'.¹ Looking forward to a revived career, Valentin began writing new material, made plans to tour again and even talked of establishing a new cabaret venue in Munich. But little came to fruition – the German film industry was decimated and the radio stations were no longer interested. Times had moved on and Germany, it seemed, no longer had much enthusiasm for a comedian who had previously struck such a chord. The man who had once been the most successful and highest paid cabaret performer in Germany was reduced to hawking around home-made ornamental knick-knacks, to feed himself.

Nevertheless Valentin persevered and in October 1947 he reformed his previously hugely successful stage partnership with Liesl Karlstadt, after a seven-year separation. They continued to make sporadic appearances together until the end of January 1948 and, although there were some favourable reviews, 'he finally had to accept that his career was long over'.² After performing on January 31, a break in his schedule allowed him to take to his bed in an effort to shake off a cold. Little more than a week later, on 9 February 1948, he died. The cause, according to his death certificate, was a cold, but one that was undoubtedly exacerbated by malnutrition and disappointment.

'Father and Son' is a piece that emanates from this final period of Valentin's life and is interesting not least because it simultaneously looks back on two of his most successful pre-war partnerships, with Karlstadt and Brecht.

Keywords

Karl Valentin
Munich cabaret
Liesl Karlstadt
politics
Nazism
Brecht

1. Michael Schulte, *Karl Valentin: Eine Biographie*, Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1982, p. 200.
2. Schulte, p. 200.

3. See Murray Hill, 'Karl Valentin in the Third Reich: No Laughing Matter', *German Life and Letters*, XXXVI, 1983, 6, pp. 41–56.
4. See Robert Eben Sackett, *Popular Entertainment, Class and Politics in Munich, 1900–1923*, Cambridge, MA & London: Harvard University Press, 1982, pp. 124–135.
5. Sackett, p. 75.
6. Sackett, pp. 91–92.
7. Peter Jelavich, *Berlin Cabaret*, Cambridge, MA & London: Harvard University Press, 1996, p. 230.
8. Hill, pp. 47 and 49.
9. F.K.M. Hillenbrand, *Underground Humour in Nazi Germany 1933–1945*, London & New York: Routledge, 1995, p. 18.
10. Hill, pp. 44–46.
11. Hill, p. 46.
12. Hill, p. 51. *Die Erbschaft* is available on Karl Valentin & Liesl Karlstadt, *Die Kurzfilme*, (3 DVD Edition), Film 101, 2002, MOK 9003.

Valentin and politics

It has often been argued that most of Valentin's comedy was not political,³ except for the implicit anarchism of his habitual subversion of the normal rules of language and logic. Where he dealt with more explicitly political matters, this was subtly coded by the use of innuendo and comic analogy. A good example of this is the 1924 two-act play, *The Robber Barons Outside Munich*, which satirized contemporary German militarism, particularly the National Socialists, by showing a bunch of incompetent soldiers in a historical setting, guarding the city walls from imminent attack.⁴ Valentin's coded subversiveness was so well known to audiences that, in the early days of World War I, when economic necessity forced him to sing serious patriotic songs, he succeeded in making audiences laugh even though he was trying to sing them straight.⁵ Even the coded approach led to trouble with the authorities, though. An untitled 1917 monologue contrasted the treatment of the war wounded with that of Bavarian King Ludwig, in the process implying that the king had no brain. This was reported to the Munich police, and Valentin was banned from performing for six weeks.⁶

Valentin and the Third Reich

Such problems only got worse under the Nazis, and the fact that he continued to operate as a commercial entertainer under their hateful regime might appear to give some credibility to those who have argued against his Leftish sympathies. He was admired by the Nazi hierarchy, with Goebbels praising his performance at the Berlin KaDeKo in January 1930, in contrast with the rest of the show that was dismissed as, 'a totally Jewish affair'.⁷ Moreover, he was forced to make certain compromises, like joining various Nazi cultural organizations and allowing his work to be published in *Brennessel*, a pro-Nazi satirical magazine.⁸

In spite of this, he continued his coded satire of the powerful. In a 1934 sketch, he implicitly sent up the attacks on freedom of speech: Liesl Karlstadt asked him his views on the Nazis, and he replied, 'I'm saying nothing at all. I just hope *that* at least will be allowed'.⁹ He continued to use analogy, as in 1938s *The Removal*, which showed a poor couple being evicted from their house by a huge excavator as a way of commenting on the recent annexation of Austria.¹⁰

As before, this kind of thing made trouble with the authorities inevitable. *The Removal* was denounced by the Nazis as being full of 'sordid tendencies' (*Elendstendenzen*), and Valentin dropped it from his repertoire after fewer than 100 performances.¹¹ At least two of his films were banned, including 1936s *The Inheritance*, with its portrayal of dire housing conditions.¹²

The explicit satire of 'Father and Son', with its scathing attack on the economic roots of war and 'this swindle . . . called International Capitalism', is remarkable because of its unequivocal openness. Working without the

restraints of censorship in pre-Nazi and Nazi Germany, Valentin could shed the innuendo and analogy and make his pacifist views absolutely plain.

Karl Valentin and Liesl Karlstadt

By the time Valentin first encountered Elisabeth Wellano in 1911, he was already a well-known and successful solo performer in his native Munich, having made his breakthrough with the monologue 'The Aquarium' in 1908.¹³ Wellano adopted the stage name Liesl Karlstadt in honour of Valentin's hero, the *Salonhumorist* Karl Maxstadt, and in her Valentin found the perfect stage partner. They soon established themselves as the top act on the Munich cabaret scene – a position they enjoyed for the next twenty-five years. Valentin's film work shows many examples of his fascination with opposing extremes of physicality, and there is no doubt that his height and lankiness contrasted well with Karlstadt's short, tubby stature. They also shared that indefinable quality of rapport and affinity which is common to so many double acts, and their creative relationship was an intense one, which ended only with Karlstadt's nervous breakdown in 1935, although they did perform together sporadically up until 1940.

Undoubtedly, Valentin was the senior partner, the headline name, the artistic director and the principal writer, but, as much of their material was developed or refined through improvisation, Karlstadt's contribution is always in danger of being undervalued. Furthermore, to give Karlstadt due credit, her role in the partnership was crucial in inspiring Valentin to create some of his best material. Following Karlstadt's illness, Valentin briefly found a new partner in Annemarie Fischer, but although they remained friends for the rest of his life, their stage partnership was not successful. It is perhaps telling that in his final months Valentin returned to the partnership that had been the source of so much of his past success.

'Father and Son' is a sketch that is clearly written with Karlstadt in mind, with Valentin in the role of the father and Karlstadt in that of the son. Their stage relationship was always more complex than simply the straight man/funny man duo, and the format we have here of Valentin being frustrated by Karlstadt's innocence is one that they had used on numerous previous occasions. Furthermore, this is a replay of a Father-Son relationship that had been the cornerstone of one of their most successful pre-war sketches, 'The Confirmation', which was first performed in 1922 and made into a film in 1934.¹⁴ In it, Valentin plays a father who takes his son for a celebration meal in an expensive restaurant following the boy's confirmation. Valentin becomes flummoxed by the unfamiliar conventions and etiquette of the social situation in which he finds himself, whereas Karlstadt, as the wide-eyed innocent, understands and copes with the situation much better.

In 'Father and Son', Valentin plays the supposedly older and wiser father, charged with explaining the causes of war to his inquisitive son. It

13. See Oliver Double and Michael Wilson. 'Karl Valentin's illogical subversion: stand-up comedy and alienation effect', *New Theatre Quarterly*, XX, 2004, 3, pp. 203–215.

14. *Der Firmling* is available on Karl Valentin & Liesl Karlstadt, *Die Kurzfilme*, (3 DVD Edition), Film 101, 2002, MOK 9003.

15. Bertolt Brecht, *The Messingkauf Dialogues*, (trans. John Willett), London: Methuen, 1965, p. 69.

is, in fact, a piece of *Verfremdung*, where the son's innocent questions reveal that the father can see all too clearly the savage economic logic behind wars which are engineered through unemployment, but accepts the situation as inevitable. It's this fatalistic outlook as much as anything else that is being satirized. As clear-sighted as he is, the father admits that if there were another war he'd be outwitted into working in the arms factory again.

Brecht, who worked closely with Valentin in Munich in the early 1920s, declared in *The Messingkauf Dialogues* that he learned most about theatre from Valentin.¹⁵ Here Valentin seems to be providing a possibly unconscious echo of Brecht's epic style, in the evolution of which he was a major influence. 'Father and Son' is certainly redolent of the *Lehrstück* and also of the train scene in Brecht's 1932 film *Kuhle Wampe*, where the passengers argue about the causes of the rising price of coffee.

Father and Son Discuss the War (By Karl Valentin, translated by Michael Wilson and Oliver Double)

Son : Now then, Father, is it true that war is a dangerous thing?
(10 years old)

Father: Most certainly. Why, it's the most dangerous thing there is!

Son: Then why do they keep on having wars, if it's so dangerous?

Father: My word! It's just that as long as there are human beings, there will be wars.

Son: Is it true, Father, that whenever a king or an emperor upsets a king or an emperor from another country, then there's always a war?

Father: No, no, it's not that simple. First of all they have to ask the Prime Minister and the Cabinet.

Son: And if the Prime Minister agrees, then there'll be a war?

Father: No – first of all they have to assemble Parliament and the parties decide between war and peace.

Son: Are those the same kind of parties that we have at home?

Father: Stupid boy! These are political parties, chosen by the people.

Son: So are the people asked whether or not they want a war?

Father: No! The people aren't asked, because they are represented by the parties, because you couldn't fit 60 million people into the parliament building – that's why the people have their representatives.

Son: My friend says his father's a representative.

Father: No, Son – he is only a *sales* representative for a cigarette factory.

Son: Then he could supply all the cigarettes.

Father: No! In wartime there's no need for sales reps because everything is rationed.

Son: Well then, Father, perhaps the soldiers are asked if they want a war?

- Father:** No! The soldiers aren't asked – they must go to war as soon as it's declared – except for the volunteers, of course.
- Son:** Don't the volunteers also have to fight?
- Father:** No, a volunteer doesn't have to fight, but he will fight, because that's what happens in a war.
- Son:** Then he does have to fight!
- Father:** But only voluntarily.
- Son:** Is it true, Father, that the Emperor has to have all the guns, cannons, shells and all the weapons of war specially made?
- Father:** Of course.
- Son:** That must be expensive, Father.
- Father:** Terribly expensive. They cost many, many billions.
- Son:** The emperor can easily afford it though, because he's so rich.
- Father:** He's terribly rich. The emperor is the richest man in the land.
- Son:** How did he get so rich, Father?
- Father:** Because of the people – because of all the taxes.
- Son:** But the people aren't rich like the emperor.
- Father:** That's true, but there are so many of them. They are the masses. If, for example, 60 million people each pay only one pound in tax every year, that already makes 60 million pounds.
- Son:** Does the emperor get the 60 million pounds then?
- Father:** No, that belongs to the State and the emperor then gets something from the State, perhaps about five million, enough to keep his family comfortable.
- Son:** Five million? But you don't earn that much, do you, Father?
- Father:** No, in a year I earn just less than two thousand.
- Son:** But when you worked in the armaments factory, you earned more than that, didn't you?
- Father:** Yes, but that was only during the war.
- Son:** So, Father, is war a good thing for the level of earnings?
- Father:** Well, yes . . . but . . .
- Son:** But what?
- Father:** It's better to earn less and live in peace.
- Son:** I see, Father, so if you and your friends didn't work in the arms factory, then there would be no weapons, and then there would always be peace, because you can't have a war without weapons.
- Father:** Yes, yes, you're right, but all the workers in the whole world would have to agree to it.
- Son:** Then why don't they?
- Father:** My son, you are still so young. You wouldn't understand even if I explained it. The workers are always outwitted by the capitalists.
- Son:** What do you mean, 'outwitted'?
- Father:** Outwitted. It's all engineered through unemployment. When unemployment reaches a high after a few years, war is already on the horizon.

- Son:** What happens then?
- Father:** They start looking for workers again.
- Son:** Then the workers are happy that there's more work to be had again.
- Father:** Four million people then go and work in the factories making parts for five million sewing machines.
- Son:** Sewing machines? Father, what do they need sewing machines for in a war?
- Father:** That's just what they tell the workers. In reality they're actually for machine guns.
- Son:** And do the workers believe that? And how do they get them to make the huge artillery barrels?
- Father:** They tell the workers they're making telescopes for looking at the stars.
- Son:** Come off it, Father, nobody would be taken in by such a stupid lie.
- Father:** I know it doesn't make sense, but there are all the weapons and they've been made by the workers.
- Son:** And were you also taken in by this lie?
- Father:** Not at all. I immediately knew that the weapons were for the war.
- Son:** Then why didn't you go on strike?
- Father:** I can't go on strike all by myself! All the workers in the world would have to go on strike and not make any more weapons and then perhaps we'd have an end to these wretched wars.
- Son:** So why don't the workers do that?
- Father:** My son, you're talking nonsense. If I hadn't gone to work in the arms factory after the Great Depression, then we – you, your mother and I – would have starved. And so would all the other workers.
- Son:** But you did work and still today we'll soon be starving again.
- Father:** No, it won't be that bad.
- Son:** But if another war was on its way, would you work in the arms factory again?
- Father:** I suppose so, because they'd outwit us again, just as in the last war.
- Son:** But Father, if it's really like you say it is, then there'll never be lasting peace in the world.
- Father:** Never. And that's why I said that as long as there are human beings, there will be wars.
- Son:** Human beings? But father, in that case, surely you should say that as long as there are workers, there will be wars?
- Father:** No, I should say that as long as there are such swindlers who will always swindle the workers, then there will be wars.
- Son:** So the swindle is to blame for the wars?
- Father:** That's it exactly! And this swindle is called International Capitalism.
- Son:** So can't it be wiped out?

Father: No! Except by atom bombs and they would destroy the whole world.

Son: So, Father, it's a sore point, but . . . who would make the atom bombs?

Father: Why, the workers, of course.

Son: So if all the workers of the world were united, there would still be a war?

Father: No – no more – then there would be eternal peace.

Son: But really, Father, will they ever be united?

Father: Never!

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