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**PERFORMING IN CRISIS MODE:
THE MUNICH NATIONAL THEATER, THE GREAT
EXHIBITION AND THE CHOLERA EPIDEMIC OF 1854**

**Sceny kryzysowe: monachijski Teatr Narodowy,
Wielka Wystawa i epidemia cholery w 1854 roku**

Abstract: In 1854, the city of Munich had arranged for the “First General German Industrial Exhibition” to promote German industry to the world and invited a global audience to the event. At the same time, Franz Dingelstedt, director of the National Theater, organized a festival displaying the finest actors from Germany. Right after the opening of the festival, cholera started raging in the city and leaving 3,000 deaths in the final count. The author sketches out the role of the theatre in this crisis, when Dingelstedt was ordered by the king to keep the theatre open at any cost. This appears awkward, in regard to the current global pandemic crisis where theaters have been identified as risk zones for infection and consequently closed down. Why was the theatre at the time considered a safe and appropriate place even helping to counter the disease?

Keywords: cholera epidemic, German theater, theater history 1800–1900, National Theater in Munich, Franz von Dingelstedt, medical and health discourse

Abstrakt: W 1854 roku w Monachium zorganizowano Pierwszą Ogólnoniemiecką Wystawę Przemysłową, która miała prezentować niemieckie towary przemysłowe przed międzynarodową publicznością. W tym samym czasie Franz Dingelstedt, dyrektor monachijskiego Teatru Narodowego, zorganizował festiwal prezentujący najlepszych niemieckich aktorów. Zaraz po jego otwarciu w mieście wybuchła epidemia cholery, która uśmierciła 3000 osób. Autorka rysuje rolę teatru w tym kryzysie, podkreślając, że Dingelstedt otrzymał od króla rozkaz, by za wszelką cenę utrzymać teatr otwarty dla publiczności. Wydaje się to osobliwe, zważywszy, że w obecnym kryzysie pandemicznym teatry zostały zidentyfikowane jako strefy ryzyka zakażenia i w konsekwencji zamknięte. Dlaczego w tamtym czasie teatr był więc uważany za miejsce bezpieczne, a nawet pomagające w zwalczaniu choroby? (*Przel. E. Olechnowicz*)

Słowa kluczowe: epidemia cholery, teatr niemiecki, historia teatru 1800–1900, Teatr Narodowy w Monachium, Franz von Dingelstedt, dyskurs medyczny

1854 was meant to be a great year both for the city of Munich and the local National Theater. The city had arranged for the “First General German Industrial Exhibition” to promote and display German engineering skills and products to the world and invited a global audience to the event. Mirroring this industrial showcase, Franz Dingelstedt, director of the National Theatre, organized a series of performances in order to promote and display the finest actors from the German *Länder* to an international audience. He curated a so-called *Gesammt-Gastspiel* (United/Total Performance Festival) bringing together the most famous German actors performing the classic German repertoire. However, in the very first week of the festival, someone in the auditorium fainted – the city’s first recorded victim of cholera. What followed was an epidemic that held the city in its grip for five months, leading to a toll of 3,000 deaths.¹ The Royal court, the Bavarian government, and the city authorities turned from welcoming international crowds into crisis management mode.

In today’s Covid-19 pandemic² we are experiencing a re-semanticization of public and private spaces through medical and political discourses. Our understanding of how infections spread – how people turn into contagious “super spreaders” or remain unaffected, how vulnerable social groups and their usual dwelling places are identified – has a great impact on our conception of which sites are safe and dangerous and, consequently, on our spatial practices and social habits. Virologists consider aerosols an important medium for spreading the virus – meaning the air we breathe and share with others carries a high risk of infection. Therefore, “social distancing” seems to be the most effective remedy for cutting off infection chains. In all European countries affected by the pandemic, cultural events (such as concerts, sports events and theatrical performances) came to a total stop over summer and again ceased in late fall 2020. European governments consider such events high risk activities and do not allow large gatherings of people and audiences. As of today, we cannot yet foresee the full

¹ In the 1850s Munich had around 100,000 inhabitants. At the time of the cholera epidemic, Munich was welcoming up to 3,000–5,000 daily visitors attending its industrial and arts exhibitions.

² As I write this, Europe is experiencing a second wave of the pandemic. As of today (1 December 2020), the German population is living in a second lockdown. The city of Munich (1.5 mln inhabitants) recorded 30,000 people infected today, and 335 fatalities.

economic and social consequences of such rigid limitations for artists and audiences alike. But we can already state that smaller theater and cultural institutions are facing great difficulties when it comes to running their businesses and many of them will disappear. Some artists and theaters have started to transform their performances in order to adapt them to other media formats such as internet streaming³ or video recordings. Even though audiences appreciate these attempts at continuity, try to be supportive and show solidarity with theaters and artists in difficulty, the desperate longing for live communal gatherings and aesthetic experiences in a real theater and performance space is painfully felt by theater lovers. Over the last few centuries, we have developed a sense of theater as a communal and fully accessible space where we can freely share spectacle, emotions, intellectual challenges, and – not least – the air we breathe, in a safe and appropriate framework. This is a historic moment where we have become aware of what is at stake in the performing arts as a cultural and social event, and how precious experiencing them can become. Apart from the health, economic and social aspects of the crisis, we are also facing a cultural crisis that will need all our efforts to heal in post-Covid times.

The experience of the current crisis – and particularly the limitations, possibilities and challenges for the performing arts – has made me fully aware of the deep entanglement of theater as a cultural practice with concepts of the public sphere and medical discourse. When turning to a historical case where theater was similarly forced to perform in crisis mode under epidemic conditions, analysis of it brings out once again the huge impact of public health discourse on how one thinks about the public sphere/public space with concrete consequences for the theater. In my contribution, I therefore sketch out the role and function of the Munich National Theatre, and how it operates within the framework of a public sphere that has been shaped by historical discourse on the causes and effects of cholera. This can also shed some light on similar discursive configurations in today's crisis, even though conclusions were different then: in the summer of 1854 the Bavarian king left the city to remain at a safe distance from the epidemic's center, yet he ordered the theater's director, Franz Dingelstedt, to keep the theater open and active for the good of the people.

In Dingelstedt's day, the theater had just reached its first bloom as a bourgeois activity in Germany, after the transformational period around 1800 where court theaters opened up to become modern public institutions. The court theater in

³ The Munich based theater, Freie Bühne, has most recently premiered (9 October 2020) a first, fully-streamed performance of Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*, bringing performers from their individual sites into a totally virtual performance space and scenography. Despite the fact that their computers crashed several times before the show could even begin, the result was aesthetically very interesting. Ironically, the audience for the premiere gathered in a black box theatre "as usual," somehow re-enacting the live experience of theatre on different terms.

Munich only allowed public access from 1799 when a new ruler, the elector Max Joseph IV (later the first king of Bavaria by the name of Max I), came to Munich. A new theater was built in 1818 outside, but near, the residence in the center of the city and it became a meeting place for burghers and the bourgeois population.⁴ In the very same year, Max I introduced a state constitution laying out a distinction between the state as a public structure and the ruling dynasty in terms of political power and property. This also had an impact on the funding of the theater, which was now partly based on Max I's own monetary resources (the "cabinet treasury") and on the national budget (the "public treasury"). So, the theater became an institution mediating between the general public and the king. This was also mirrored in its official title, the Royal Court and National Theater (Königliches Hof- und Nationaltheater). In the cholera outbreak of the summer of 1854, this intermediate status had an effect on the activities of the theater. According to the historical medical discourse, which did not see any problem with social gatherings, it not only was considered a safe space but even played a part in the health strategy, strengthening the immune system against cholera by lifting people's spirits.

THE *GESAMMT-GASTSPIEL* AND CHOLERA

In his memoirs from 1879, Franz Dingelstedt gives an account of the first case of cholera hitting the theater:

Tuesday, 18th July, during the first performance of *Faust*, police director Düring came to my theater box to make an urgent report, as he said. We went outside and promenaded up and down the corridor. With trepidation, he asked how long the Gesamtgastspiel was planned to go on. Well, we were just approaching the final act of the fifth evening, and with such ever growing success, I could count on dozens of more performances. Düring shook his head and whispered to me: "Hurry to end your festival. Quickly bring in your harvest. There is a tornado approaching that we cannot keep secret any longer. I have just come out of the theater's sickroom. A young lad was brought there and immediately was sent to the hospital. Poor soul. He had just arrived from Zurich, tonight, and instantly hurried to the theater to see [Marie] Seebach⁵ playing Gretchen. Before she took to the stage, he was carried out; his luggage still lies in the cloakroom. Our police doctor and the theater doctor both agreed in their diagnosis: it's Cholera."⁶

⁴ The new Court and National Theatre burnt down in 1823 and was quickly rebuilt and re-opened in 1825. The municipalities largely sponsored the re-construction of the theater, e.g. by introducing a tax on beer in the city. Forever after, the theater was considered to belong even more to the city than to the king.

⁵ Marie Seebach was a young singer and actress from the Hamburg Thalia Theater, whose career was substantially boosted by the Munich Gesamtgastspiel. As a consequence, she became widely acclaimed and was invited to perform at the Burgtheater in Vienna and at the Court Theatre in Meiningen.

⁶ Franz von Dingelstedt, *Münchener Bilderbogen* (Berlin: Paetel, 1879), 92f. Author's translation.

München.



Königl. Hof- und National-Theater.

Dienstag den 18. Juli 1854.

Mit aufgehobenem Abonnement.

Fünfte Gesamt-Gastspiel-Vorstellung:

FAUST

Tragödie in sechs Abtheilungen von Goethe.

Personen:

Faust Wagner, sein Famulus Mephistopheles Margaretha Valentin, ihr Bruder Frau Marthe, ihre Nachbarin Brander Fraum Alonzer Sichel Schüler Der Erdgeist Eine Hexe Ein böser Geist Bürger und Bürgerinnen, Bürgermädchen, Dienstmädchen, Schüler, Soldaten, Handwerksburschen, Geister und Erachtungen.	Herr Hendrichs , aus Berlin. Herr Kulzer , aus Hannover. Herr Boering , aus Berlin. Frau Schuchly , aus Hamburg. Herr Emil Bevent , aus Dresden. Frau Heintzinger , aus Wien. Herr Keller , aus München. Herr Christen , aus München. Herr L. Schmidt , aus München. Herr Sigt , aus München. Herr Schneider , aus Karlsruhe. Herr Hätigen , aus München. Frau Hätigen , aus München.
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Die Kasse wird um halb fünf Uhr geöffnet.

Anfang um sechs Uhr, Ende halb zehn Uhr.

Der freie Eintritt ist ohne alle Ausnahme aufgehoben, und wird ohne Eintritts-Karte Niemand eingelassen.

Unpäßlich: *Franz Damböck.*

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Theatre Bill of *Faust*, 18 July 1854, Hof- und Nationaltheater München © Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv München

It was an extraordinary case: a young man had traveled from Zurich to go to the theater in Munich. He had presumably traveled for more than 20 hours on the train. He might have come into close contact with any one of the thousands of travelers who wanted to visit the great exhibition in Munich. He might have been very thirsty once he got off the train, and may well have drunk some water from a well in the vicinity of the main station.⁷ One thing was sure: He was also thirsty

⁷ One of the doctors stated in the *Haupt-Bericht* that a young lady arrived at the Munich main station and drank a lot of water after she got off the train. Two days later in her hometown Berchtesgaden, she was diagnosed with cholera. The doctor, however, following the miasmatic idea, did not suspect the water as being the cause of the infection: “She quenched her thirst with a lot of fresh water, which she found delicious. Apart from a bloating in her stomach due to the amount of water, she felt perfectly well after.” See Aloys Martin, *Haupt-Bericht über die Cholera-Epidemie des Jahres 1854 im Königreiche Bayern* (München: Cotta, 1857), 38f.

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Franz Dingelstedt (1814–1881). Lithographie from: Franz Dingelstedt, *Münchener Bilderbogen*, Berlin 1879, frontispiece

to see a famous young actress in one of the most prominent female lead roles in the German repertoire and therefore hurried to the theater immediately after arriving. It takes some time before Gretchen even comes on stage – thus the diarrhea had some time to develop. It all came together: increased mobility, huge crowds on the trains, a hot humid summer, and highly attracting cultural events such as an exhibition or a theater festival.

From April 1854 onward, Dingelstedt had planned and organized what he called a *Gesamt-Gastspiel*, presenting a series of classic German plays performed by outstanding German actors he had contracted from all of Germany's *Länder*, particularly from the big theater hubs of Berlin, Vienna and Dresden. Dingelstedt had taken up his position in Munich in 1851 at a time when king Max II (ruling from 1848) was striving to develop the city of Munich into an international center of academic and cultural repute. Dingelstedt was esteemed both as a liberal thinker who played a prominent role in Germany's *Vormärz*, and as an ambitious theater reformer who promoted *mise-en-scène* and elaborate scenography. He was offered the position of theater director at one of the

larger German courts, which came as a liberation from a somewhat mediocre job as a dramaturge, and later librarian, with limited involvement in production processes at the court theater in Stuttgart.

Max II collected the most reputable scholars from all of the German speaking countries to teach and conduct research at the University of Munich, and invited artists and cultural workers from all over Europe to develop the cultural sector in the city. Public life in Munich had hitherto been reigned over by hermetic Bavarian circles; the new king saw an urge to reform and tried to open it up to international⁸ influences. Even though Max II was quite popular and widely respected as a king and personality, not all of those around him fully embraced the influx of all these “strangers” to the city, claiming agency in academic and cultural circles. Dingelstedt (originally from Hessa), and a whole group of the so-called “Northern lights” (from Munich’s perspective, anything beyond the river Main was considered “Northern”), met heavy resistance particularly from the nobility, Catholic clergy and wealthy bourgeoisie. By the mid-1860s – Max II died in 1864 – these influential groups had managed to rid Munich of the “Northern” influences. The king’s reform processes came to a halt. Dingelstedt had been an early victim of the counter-reform, and he was dismissed in February 1857.

Only three years earlier, in 1854, however, Dingelstedt had seen a chance to bring his theatrical career to another level, largely owing to Max II’s “globalization” attempts, which had started to the ball rolling when he opened the “First General Industrial Exhibition” on 15 July. Smaller industrial exhibitions had already taken place in the German Confederation (1842 in Mainz, 1844 in Berlin, 1850 in Vienna), but Max II preferred to follow international blueprints for the organization of his exhibition. The London exhibition of 1851 was in particular a model. The architecture of the Munich Glaspalast, erected during the eight months preceding the opening, clearly took the famous Crystal Palace in London as an inspiration.

When it came to size, Max II also operated on an international scale. With more than 6,500 exhibitors displaying their products in the Bavarian capital, he competed closely with the New York exhibition of 1853. Taking into account that Munich had around 100,000 inhabitants in the 1850s, we can understand the challenge and also the impact of the exhibition on city life. Every day, from the general opening on 17 July until mid-August, between 2,000 and 5,000 daily visitors attended the exhibits, and between 5,000 and 10,000 foreigners were hosted in the city. Most of these visitors traveled by train and arrived at the main station, which

⁸ “International” had a different meaning at the time. Germany was split up into a few larger nations, such as Prussia and the Austrian Empire, some medium-size Länder, such as Saxony and Bavaria, and many tiny units. So, anything beyond the Bavarian border was “international.”

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Glaspalast, 1854 © Lithographie by Peter Herwegen, Stadtarchiv München



Inside the Glaspalast, 1854 © Lithographie by Peter Herwegen, Stadtarchiv München

was located within walking distance of the exhibition site. The daily newspapers described prominent visitors, e.g. the Austrian emperor and the Prussian king, who were welcomed by Max II and his Queen Mary, who visited the exhibition together with them. The city's commercial life, social life and cultural life interacted closely, since visiting the exhibition was topped off by attending arts exhibitions in the city, by participating in grand social gatherings, and by daily visits to the theater.

As the city buzzed while planning the industrial exhibition from spring 1854, Franz Dingelstedt had the idea to additionally demonstrate German industriousness and ingenuity as regards acting and performing. Only recently (in the fall of 1853), he had overseen a substantial renovation of the premises and the introduction of gas lighting to the theater.⁹ Dingelstedt now was head of a fully representative and modern institution, ready to host international critics and theater lovers. He created the concept of a *Gesammt-Gastspiel*, showing off from 11 to 31 July the most outstanding German actors¹⁰ in the main roles of classic German plays, such as Schiller's *Bride of Messina* and *Maria Stuart*, Goethe's *Faust* and *Egmont*, and Lessing's *Emilia Galotti*. Dingelstedt's greatest achievement did not only lie in bringing together such excellent artistic individuals, but also in creating a superb ensemble performance and an exceptional overall *mise-en-scène*. Reports of the performances thus emphasize the beautiful *Gesamteindruck* (overall impression) of the productions over any individual triumph of the actors, e.g. a review of *Minna von Barnhelm*, the second performance scheduled in the *Gesammt-Gastspiel*, from *Allgemeine Zeitung* reads:

All the spaces in the house were overflowing, and the bravos and enthusiastic applause extended to all the actors. And from scene to scene an impression arose not only of a performance executed excellently in all its individual parts, but of a totally rounded representation achieved through coherent ensemble acting and a consistent style.¹¹

This ensemble acting and consistent style was achieved particularly due to Dingelstedt's insistence on appealing choreography for groups of actors when

⁹ Between 25 October and 25 December 1853, the theater building was closed for the renovation. Dingelstedt re-opened the National and Court Theatre with a performance of Goethe's *Faust* "with festive illumination." See Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv, Theaterzettel 1853, theatre bill from *Faust*, 26 December 1853.

¹⁰ Dingelstedt had contracted Heinrich Anschütz, Carl La Roche, Luise Neumann, Amalie Haizinger and Julie Rettich from Burgtheater Wien; Theodor Döring, Hermann Hendrichs, Theodor Liedtke from the Royal Theatre in Berlin; Marie Seebach from the Thalia Theater in Hamburg; Wilhelm Kaiser from the Court Theatre Hannover; Heinrich Schneider from the Court Theatre Karlsruhe; and Emil Devrient from the Court Theatre Dresden. From his own troupe in Munich he included Friedrich Haase, Constanze Dahn, Marie Dahn-Hausmann, Johann Karl Friedrich Jost, Adolf Christen, Ferdinand Lang, and Marie Damböck.

¹¹ *Allgemeine Zeitung*, München, 16 July 1854.

they moved (e.g. choirs, mass groups) and on a coherent scenography providing a seamless backdrop for the soloists.

Reviews of the *Gesamt-Gastspiel*, and also the memoirs and biographies of the participating actors,¹² rarely hint at the epidemic. Otto A. Banck is one of the few who mentions cholera. He concludes his summary of events in an ironic tone:

Dingelstedt's broader idea to continue the performances with a series of classical model stagings, serious opera, light sophisticated comedy and comic opera in the Odeon concert house was, as is a known fact, made impossible by the unplanned and "gratis" advent of a great tragic guest actress – cholera.¹³

But his main point was to emphasize that the event attracted people from the "intelligentsia," who "more and more clearly recognize that the presented performances contribute importantly to an intellectual national property."¹⁴ He praises Dingelstedt not only for his ambitious efforts to organize the festival, but he also states that the director had chosen the right moment because, due to the industrial and art exhibitions, "thousands of the most educated people of Germany are gathering here to see the performances and necessarily further distribute their impressions and thus help to foster productive consequences for the theater." Moreover, Banck considered Munich to be the perfect location for such an undertaking. At the beginning of his report on the Munich festival, he writes a picturesque description that stands in stark contrast to the actual crisis, directing the reader's gaze away from the rotten sewage structures under the city to the wide open skies over Munich:

It is not only the Athenians surroundings,¹⁵ but also the climatic influence, that are the reasons why the soul is always aesthetically more lifted than in other places. The city rises high above sea level. This and the close vicinity of the Alps to the south of the city completely explain the pureness, the fine, thin clearness of the air that has a vitalizing effect on the nerves. Even though the proximity of the mountains often causes sudden weather changes, from a humid summer

¹² E.g. Heinrich Anschütz does not mention cholera at all, and neither does it appear in Julie Rettich's biography. Additionally, in a book on Constanze Dahn, Marie Dahn-Hausmann and Friedrich Dahn, the epidemic is not mentioned. They focus fully on the performances as such, not on the circumstances. They do not want to be remembered for performing in a time of cholera. See Heinrich Anschütz, *Erinnerungen aus dessen Leben nach eigenhändigen Aufzeichnungen und mündlichen Mittheilungen* (Wien: Sommer, 1866); Alexander von Weilen, *Julie Rettich. Erinnerungsblätter zum Gedächtnisse ihres hundertsten Geburtstags* (Wien: Manz, 1909); Rolf Grashey, *Die Familie Dahn und das Münchner Hofschauspiel 1833–1899* (Munich: Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, 1931).

¹³ Otto A. Banck, "Die Münchener Mustervorstellungen im Jahre 1854," in *Kritische Wanderungen in drei Kunstgebieten. Licht- und Schattenbilder zur Geschichte und Charakteristik der deutschen Bühne, modernen Literatur und bildenden Kunst*, vol. 1 (Leipzig: Dürr, 1865), 393–440.

¹⁴ Banck, "Die Münchener Mustervorstellungen im Jahre 1854," 423.

¹⁵ Banck is hinting here at the neo-classical architecture of the museums and monuments – initiated by Ludwig I – that had a critical influence on Munich's appearance as a "city of the arts" in the nineteenth century.

day to gray rainy shadows, how beautifully this gray and thick rainy sky opens up to a bluer and wider open horizon than ours, shining down again on the lush green vegetation.

The light and pure air of the city did not prevent cholera from taking its full effects on the inhabitants and guests alike. At the moment cholera struck the theater, the state authorities had already become aware that something was happening in the city. But the excitement surrounding the opening of the exhibition, and the ambition to keep the wheels turning at such a historic moment, blinded the authorities to the overall health situation. Almost all of the 500 guards on duty at the industrial exhibition experienced milder forms of diarrhea from the beginning of July when the exhibitors started to bring in their exhibits. After it was falsely assumed that they had made a quick recovery, they immediately returned to their workplace spreading the disease further. Eleven of them later died of cholera. In his 1855 report on the cholera epidemic in Munich, Max Pettenkofer, biologist and virologist from the University of Munich, identified this group as a major spreader of the epidemic in the city. He identified the residences of 253 guards and found an increased number of infections, and earlier and more serious disease progression, in their homes and nearby areas.¹⁶ Pettenkofer, acting as a juror in one of the exhibition committees and often attending the Glaspalast, also fell sick on 27 July, but was able to fully recover.

From today's perspective, we can assume that cholera was brought to Munich by some of the exhibitors flowing en masse into the city from the end of June. The exhibition provided a perfect environment for the disease to spread: the heat, the crowds, the constant mixing of masses throughout the city – moving from exhibition to theater to restaurant to exhibition. Additionally, Munich had rather rudimentary water supply systems and partially developed sewers. It greatly depended on its natural wells and numerous open streams running through the city for fresh water. These were often not fully separated from the cesspits of nearby dwellings. Over the previous century, Munich had developed rapidly from a small town into an urban hub, but it was not able to keep pace with modern living requirements and essential infrastructure. From the beginning of the nineteenth century, several sewers had been built in the older parts of the city.¹⁷ Not having been systematically connected and developed, these sewers led to the nearest open water course (a stream or river) but were not fully effective, though, due to their small diameter

¹⁶ See his full analysis of the industrial exhibition as a factor in the cholera epidemic in Max von Pettenkofer, *Untersuchungen und Beobachtungen über die Verbreitungsart der Cholera: nebst Betrachtungen über Massregeln, derselben Einhalt zu thun 1855* (München: Cotta, 1855), especially 63–83.

¹⁷ For a full historical study of Munich's hygiene and sewage systems, see Peter Münch, *Stadthygiene im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert. Die Wasserversorgung, Abwasser- und Abfallbeseitigung unter besonderer Berücksichtigung Münchens* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993).



Court and National Theatre Munich, ca. 1840 © Deutsches Theatermuseum München

and overly gentle gradient. Some of the rotten waste matter entered the soil and water table through cracks and fissures in the walls.¹⁸

As early as 1836/37, the city had already been struck by cholera, but this time the epidemic hit even harder, leaving more than 3,000 dead. From early October 1854, due to a sudden change in the weather, the epidemic gradually disappeared. Pettenkofer's report, and an even more thorough report from the Royal Cholera Commission,¹⁹ had a great impact, bringing about a renovation of the water supply and sewage infrastructure in Munich. From 1856, new buildings were required to include solid cesspits with concrete walls to prevent leakage, and all older structures had to be renovated accordingly by 1860.²⁰ From the 1870s, the city invested in a large building project providing safe water supplies, which has lasted even to today.²¹ When the cholera world tour returned to Germany in the 1890s, Munich was better prepared to battle the epidemic. While Hamburg was greatly affected, Munich did not have any major cholera incidents the time round.

¹⁸ Münch, *Stadthygiene im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, 126–127.

¹⁹ See Martin, *Haupt-Bericht über die Cholera-Epidemie des Jahres 1854 im Königreiche Bayern*. Pettenkofer was also a member of the Royal Commission. His earlier report was partly included in this later volume.

²⁰ See Münch, *Stadthygiene im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, 129.

²¹ Munich is today acknowledged throughout Germany for its excellent tap water quality. The water is transported from the Alpine region (Mangfalltal) through a sophisticated tunnel system laid in the 1870s.

By the beginning of August 1854, the court and the Bavarian government were forced to acknowledge that Munich was suffering from a cholera epidemic. But still, masses of visitors flooded into the city, and information was distributed extremely slowly. Some cholera outbreaks were directly connected to those attending the exhibition, such as in the case of a young farmer's daughter who had visited Munich from 3 to 5 August to see the exhibition. She returned to her hometown, Thaining, in the county of Landsberg on Lech, and suffered diarrhea symptoms before she even got home. She had not been in contact with any visibly sick person in Munich and yet she infected her mother and her brother, which led to the death of the latter.²² Despite such cases, the king did not order the closure of the exhibition or even limit access to public spaces such as the theater.

KEEPING THE THEATER OPEN AT ANY COST

After the great success of the *Gesammt-Gastspiel*, Dingelstedt applied for a vacation on 12 August 1854, seeking an opportunity to leave the disease-ridden city. The king agreed to the application, but:

At the same time when visiting the king in Nymphenburg [the summer residence in Munich] to pay him tribute before his leaving for Berchtesgaden – I received a direct order from the king: under no circumstances should the theater be closed.²³

Hence, a vacation did not seem opportune. So, the theater director half-heartedly arranged an entertainment program for August and September. He sent his family to the countryside and remained in the cholera-stricken city. Dingelstedt thus bore witness to city life under the shroud of the epidemic.

On one hand, it was a regular custom in Munich to keep the theater open over summer because the city hosted a large number of tourists during the summer season. On the other hand, the epidemic was a confirmed and public fact by the beginning of August and the city gradually became deserted, as Dingelstedt recalls in his memoirs:

I have never seen a more horrible contrast as the one between the city of Munich in mid-July and the city of Munich in mid-August. [...] All local inns lie empty now, the theater is even emptier, and the emptiest of all is the Glaspalast, from whose hot and sticky rooms a humid breath, like from the depths of the epidemic outbreak or from a sulphury crater, is emitted towards the few visitors wandering like shadows.²⁴

²² See Martin, *Haupt-Bericht über die Cholera-Epidemie des Jahres 1854 im Königreiche Bayern*, 16.

²³ Dingelstedt, *Münchener Bilderbogen*, 98.

²⁴ Dingelstedt, 95.

In his description of the desperate situation in the city, Dingelstedt uses language that reeks of miasmatic thinking. The “humid breath” wafting from an epidemic hotspot conjures up the idea of a miasmatic cloud emanating from infectious organic matter and spreading cholera. He felt threatened by the air surrounding him (which he could no longer assume to be pure and clean) and felt an urge to flee the city.

However, he had to follow the orders of his sovereign. At first sight, the king’s command seems to follow a typical monarchical strategy that aims to lull the people with entertainment and denying any risk in order to maintain public order.²⁵ The court left the city to remain in the countryside at a safe distance from the epidemic, while public life in Munich had to go on like normal. When looking at the historical discourses on public health, and particularly on cholera, however, the picture becomes somewhat blurrier and more complex. Did it make sense to keep the theater open during the cholera epidemic in 1854?

In 1854, health discourses were still mainly based on the concepts of miasmatic theory. Miasmatic theory was passed down from ancient times and stated that contagious diseases such as the plague, malaria and cholera were caused by a miasma – a noxious form of “bad air” emanating from rotten organic matter. This theory was made obsolete by scientific research in the 1880s. Robert Koch’s full identification of the *vibrio cholerae* bacterium as the causative agent of cholera in 1884 had a substantial effects on prevention measures and medical treatments used to tackle the epidemic.

During the Munich epidemic of 1854, the public health discourse was still mainly based on miasmatic theory, even though social factors such as poverty, bad housing and poor nutrition were recognized. Experiences from the earlier cholera epidemic of 1836/37 had also shown that it was people who carried the disease to other places, into their homes and infecting their families. For this reason, the Royal Cholera Commission followed a double strategy in their research: 1) they identified the geographical locations of cholera cases in order to learn about the “miasmatic” factors of the specific sites – the condition of the sewage system, geological structures (rocky, muddy ground), the vertical position of sites (ground floor, top floor, on top of hills, in valleys), the proximity to water (streams, creeks, puddles, swamps) that possibly led to the emergence of a fog considered to be an element that carried the miasma; and 2) they identified people affected by cholera, their movements, networks, contacts and actions. The Royal Cholera Commission had already been established in 1849 when the epidemic started to near the south of Germany, but it only became fully active in the summer of 1854, issuing

²⁵ Of course we can observe such a strategy in our current crisis, particularly amongst right-wing populists.

information to doctors and non-doctors, giving advice to the government (e.g. to establish a system of medical visits to poor people not able to pay for a doctor) and starting a complete survey of cholera cases in Bavaria.²⁶ They sent out a questionnaire to doctors in all corners of the Bavarian land to obtain information about the first appearance of the epidemic, the course of developments, symptoms and potentially successful measures taken. When looking at this questionnaire,²⁷ its miasmatic grounding becomes fully apparent. The very first questions ask for the locations, quarters, houses and floors where the disease first appeared, in which geographical direction the disease developed from there, in which streets, houses and on which floors the disease appeared strongest and most serious, and the proximity of the most affected sites and locations to geological conditions, rivers, swamps and earlier floods. In relation to these geographical sites, drinking water was considered an issue, but only to distinguish “dirty” water from “fresh” water according to its external appearance and odor. In miasmatic terms, unhealthy water could be identified by its look, taste and smell.

The results of this empirical research represent a somehow “modernized” version of miasmatic theory. The *Haupt-Bericht* states as fact that cholera is spread through infection, that people who do not even have serious symptoms can be infectious, a main causative agent are infectious feces and therefore disinfection is an important measure to fight the disease. The report identified a long list of geographical and geological factors that they assumed decisive for the development of the disease.²⁸ Hence, even if epidemic contagion was acknowledged as fact, geographic and geological conditions mattered for the full development of the epidemic. Therefore, the identification of “dangerous” sites was the most important task in order to fight cholera, disinfection measures were promoted as equally important, yet any “isolation” strategy (such as closing down public spaces, closing national borders and city limits, and any kind of *Contumaz* measures like quarantine) was considered useless, and even harmful to mental health, and hence thought to weaken the physical condition.²⁹

EPIDEMIC THEATER

This miasmatic thinking lies at the core of the king’s order to keep the theater open and also had a major effect on public discourse in the city. In the 1836 instruc-

²⁶ See Martin, *Haupt-Bericht über die Cholera-Epidemie des Jahres 1854 im Königreiche Bayern*.

²⁷ Martin, X–XIII.

²⁸ Martin, 807.

²⁹ Martin, 824. In the annex to the report, a list of governmental decrees from 1836 is added because they were still valid in 1854.

tions that were issued during the first cholera epidemic, still valid at the time of the second epidemic in 1854, there is also a particular emphasis on mental well-being needing to be fully supported. The instructions begin with the following paragraph:

It is a known fact that fear and depression of the mind are certain allies and the most dangerous carriers of cholera, which is in its essence not yet fully investigated but whose appearances have been comprehensibly identified. When this noxious disease is approaching or already in a place, it must therefore be the most important principle to avoid everything that can cause or foster anxieties and consequently moral sensitivities.³⁰

What then is more frightening for the population of a city and nation if not the fact that the royal court is fleeing from an epidemic to some remote mountain village? This must have been a blow to the morale of Munich's inhabitants – maybe comparable to the flight of the Prussian court from Berlin during the French occupation in 1806–1809. Immediately after the Prussian defeat and even before the French military entered the city, the director of the National Theatre in Berlin received orders from the city council to ensure that its actors remained in the city and continued to perform as usual.³¹

In the same way, the national and court theater in Munich also had to stay open in order to compensate for the absence of the royal family. Dingelstedt had to remain on duty, keeping the residents of Munich at peace, supporting their mental and physical condition to help them to stay safe and healthy. The status of the national theater in the royal residence, as was the case with Berlin and Munich, was somehow situated between a court culture (and thus responding to the entertainment desires of the royals) and a truly public institution, offering models and practices for citizens in the modern city. The theater bills of the time indicate this middle position when they state one time that a piece was performed *auf höchsten Befehl* (on highest order) of the king, or at another time *auf allgemeines Begehren* (by demand of the general public). It was not just the repertoire of the theater but also its premises that allowed for a mediation between court and city: every night before the performance, Dingelstedt would cross the gangway from the theater to the residence and then go back again in order to accompany the king and the royal family to their box in the theater. Even though it was connected to the residence via a covered bridge, the theater was not situated inside the royal palace; it was instead fully embraced by the urban surroundings of the city. But the king still had privileged access to a special place in the theater. The theater was thus a place where the king, the audience (representing the city), and the play performed on

³⁰ Martin, 824.

³¹ See a letter from the city council to theater director August Wilhelm Iffland, 20 October 1806, quoted in Klaus Gerlach, *August Wilhelm Ifflands Berliner Bühne: Theatralische Kunstführung und Oekonomie* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2015), 276.

stage carried out a triangular act of communication. During the epidemic, however, the empty royal box constituted a *memento mori*, but still the performances on stage directed the gaze away from this void.

Dingelstedt, bearing in mind the disastrous effect of a deviation from such theatrical normality, stayed in Munich until 16 September and provided the city with a full program of theatrical entertainment. But he was fully aware of the dangers; the atmosphere behind the scenes was morbid and dark. Dingelstedt had to adapt the repertoire and tweak the cast by the hour, according to the health condition of his performers and staff.³² He found it impossible to keep performances to his aesthetic standards. In his Munich memoirs (1879), he remarks bitterly that one evening he had to change the program five times because of a series of sick notes that came in.

There was no other choice left than – with the help of the indestructible trio Mrs. Dietz, Mr. Christen, and Mr. Sigl, and one extra – to perform “Das Versprechen hinter’m Heerd” [The Promise behind the Oven] and “Der Freiherr als Wildschütz” [The Baron as a Hunter]. This happened on Sunday, 10 September 1854 – yes, on a Sunday! And exactly two months after the beginning of the *Gesammtgastspiel*!³³

These “musical comedies from the Austrian alps in one act,” by Alexander Baumann in Lower Austrian dialect, had enjoyed regional success in the German speaking south in the late 1840s. Soon after, all – author and works – fell into oblivion. Dingelstedt might not have understood the language, nor appreciated the genre. The contrast to the recent *Gesammtgastspiel* must have appeared just too obvious and painful to him, and reminded him of the sudden changes and critical situation.

The bottom of the theater bill indicates that ten actors were on sick leave (*unpäßlich*) and four on vacation (*beurlaubt*), and even though Dingelstedt therefore indeed had problems gathering a sufficient cast for larger plays, he was clearly dramatizing the situation in his memoirs of 1879. The very same play had been performed earlier on his stage,³⁴ and moreover, the September reper-

³² Indeed, the statistics on staff sick leave show that there was a substantial increase over summer. Always at the end of the month, the plays performed and the sick leave of actors was summarized and indicated on the theater bill of the performance of the day. In July, 3 actors/singers were on sick leave for 43 days in total (Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv, Theaterzettel 1854, theater bill for *Lucis von Lammermoor*, 1 August 1854), in August altogether 8 actors/singers were on sick leave for 77 days (Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv, Theaterzettel 1854, theater bill for *Die Einfalt vom Lande*, 31 August 1854), and in September, 14 actors/singers were off sick for a total of 236 days, and one singer (Henriette Rettig) died (Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv, Theaterzettel 1854, theater bill for *Am Klavier* and *Der todte Gast*, 29 September 1854).

³³ Dingelstedt, *Münchener Bilderbogen*, 100.

³⁴ It was performed, e.g., on 21 January 1853; see Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv, Theaterzettel 1853.

München.



Königl. Hof- und National-Theater.

Sonntag den 10. September 1854.

Das Versprechen hinter'm Herd

Alpenseene mit Gesang in zwei Abtheilungen von Alexander Baumann. Musik von Ignaz Lachner.

Personen:

Mikael Csanatter, Wirth in der Altemau	Herr Sigl.
Kathl, sein Sohn	Herr v. Schmid.
Barthl, Almerich, im Dienste bei Csanatter	Frau Diez.
Freiherr von Zeitgew	Herr Greifen.

Hiernauf:

Der Freiherr als Wildschütz

Alpenseene mit Gesang in zwei Abtheilungen als Nachspiel zum „Versprechen hinter'm Herd“ von Alexander Baumann. Musik von Ignaz Lachner.

Personen:

Mikael Csanatter, Wirth in der Altemau	Herr Sigl.
Kathl, sein Sohn	Herr v. Schmid.
Barthl, Almerich, im Dienste bei Csanatter	Frau Diez.
Freiherr von Zeitgew	Herr Greifen.
Waldschütze Wein	Herr Sittgen.
Maggr.	

Preise der Plätze:

Eine Loge im I. Rang	8 R. — fr.	Eine Loge im IV. Rang	5 R. — fr.
Ein Platz	1 R. 12 fr.	Ein Platz	— R. 48 fr.
Eine Loge im II. Rang	9 R. — fr.	Orchester	1 R. 12 fr.
Ein Platz	1 R. 24 fr.	Ein Herletz-Sitz	1 R. — fr.
Eine Loge im III. Rang	7 R. — fr.	Stuerere	— R. 36 fr.
Ein Platz	1 R. — fr.	Orchester	— R. 15 fr.

Die Kasse wird um halb sechs Uhr geöffnet.

Anfang um halb sieben Uhr, Ende um halb neun Uhr.

Unpäßlich: Herr Pellegrini, Herr Gärtinger, Herr Hoppe, Frau Schreud-Brandl, Fräulein Geiner, Fräulein Kettich, Frau Wirth, Fräulein Kenzl, Herr Veigh.

Verlaubt: Frau Dahn, Fräulein Damböck, Herr M. Va Roche, Fräulein Lbierra.

Der einzelne Zettel kostet 2 fr. Druck von Dr. G. Wolf & Sohn.

Theatre Bill of *Das Versprechen hinter'm Herd*, 10 September 1854, Hof- und Nationaltheater München © Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv München

toire at large – a mix of light comedy, classical drama, comic opera and serious opera – did not differ substantially from earlier months.³⁵ But we can assume that the audience now consisted mainly of simple people – since the higher and wealthy classes had left the city for their summer houses in the countryside. Dingelstedt observed that the theater boxes were now populated by servants, who had taken over the seats from their absent masters.³⁶ This audience might have particularly appreciated the chosen program and the theater generally be-

³⁵ When comparing the monthly repertoires, a slight tendency towards more light drama and light comedy/farce and away from opera can be recognized between August and September. In August/September performances included 3/1 classical plays, 9/6 light dramas, 5/6 light comedies/farces and 9/4 operas were performed, respectively.

³⁶ Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv, Theaterzettel 1853.

ing open. They were, however, the ones who were most vulnerable to the epidemic. They had no opportunity to leave the city and their poor living conditions and nutrition turned them into easy victims for the disease. The theater thus offered moral support against the anxieties caused by the perceivable effects of the epidemic elsewhere in the city.

According to Dingelstedt, in September almost every day one of the theater's workers or craftsmen died of cholera. He was well aware that these members of the theater staff, living in poor conditions in the suburbs of the city, were most prone to contagion and paid them a last tribute at the graveyard.³⁷ In the final report on the epidemic, the victims of cholera are listed by profession. From the statistics, we can learn that nine actors/singer/musicians died in Munich,³⁸ but the theater's workers and craftsmen were listed under more general categories of tailors, manufacturers, or carpenters, and thus remain unidentifiable. Dingelstedt only mentions one person by name, the solo singer Henriette Rettig, who fell victim to the epidemic on 14 September, only six days after her last performance on the theater's stage.³⁹

Performing before a half empty auditorium, bemoaning the loss of theater staff, remaining in his post while more privileged circles fled from the city – all of this added up to create a rather depressing atmosphere in front of, and behind, the scenes.⁴⁰

Nevertheless, the theater as a public meeting place was not considered inappropriate or dangerous. On the contrary, Dingelstedt remarks that since all gatherings in private houses had come to a halt, the few people that had remained in the city frequented even more often public meeting places such as pubs, restaurants and coffee houses. The theater had undergone substantial renovations between October and December 1853. The city and state had invested large amounts in introducing gas lighting and renovating the auditorium and the theater's structure. This included the completion of previously modest decorations on the walls, and the purchase of new seats and furniture. Additionally, it also entailed a restructuring of the sewage system that had been identified by the building commission as

³⁷ Dingelstedt, *Münchener Bilderbogen*, 98f.

³⁸ Martin, *Haupt-Bericht über die Cholera-Epidemie des Jahres 1854 im Königreiche Bayern*, 288.

³⁹ Her obituary is kept amongst the theater bills of the National and Court Theatre. This could mean that it was distributed to the audience together with theater bills. This is the only death notice from 1854 kept in the theatre archive, besides a formally printed announcement that due to the death of queen mother Therese, on 25 October 1854, the theater would close down for 14 days. See Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv, Theaterzettel 1854.

⁴⁰ Dingelstedt recounts that the theatre inspector had put up posters on the walls ordering: "We don't talk about cholera in these premises," see Dingelstedt, *Münchener Bilderbogen*, 98.

“not only indecent but also noxious to the health.”⁴¹ In order to avoid bad smells emanating from the toilets, a change from cesspits to modern sewage pipes was considered an effective remedy.⁴²

After the theater re-opened on 26 December 1853 with a performance of Goethe’s *Faust*, the building had the air of a light, modern, accessible and pleasant space. Meeting up in the foyer, in the theatre café and salons, theater-goers fully enjoyed their visit to the theater in aesthetic and social terms. In his report on the Gesamt-Gastspiel in July 1854, Otto A. Banck emphasizes the extraordinary fact that ice cream was served at the theater during intermissions, and – tongue in cheek – gives a hint of the pleasurable experience to be had at the theater even on a hot summer night:

While in Dresden and Berlin one could bake apples on the balustrades of the theater boxes, this beautiful and – particularly for the ladies – pleasing habit on hot summer days never disturbs the overall impression, because between this consumption of ice cream, people observe the classical plays with the same grace and attention as in our theaters.⁴³

So, we can assume that, in contrast to living under Covid-19 conditions, Munich’s inhabitants felt completely safe in the company of other people, gathering around tables or sitting side by side in a narrow theater box. Again, the miasmatic logic was at the core of this lax attitude towards public spaces and events. The differentiation between private and public, between isolated and open, between an individual and common activity or space, did not mark the line between safe and dangerous. Either a place was identified as dangerous due to its location, geological structure, and miasmatic disposition, or it was considered safe, no matter how many people visited or avoided the place. The medical and scientific discourse based on miasmatic grounds clearly had an impact on the mental map of the city that dwellers had, including in cultural terms. The theater, a solid stone building located near the royal residence, provided meeting spaces outside of generally unsafe housing conditions. With its modern gas lighting and revamped decorations, it gave the impression of being a shelter from cholera and also provided succor for patrons’ emotional, moral and affective hygiene. Performing in crisis mode not only meant offering a distracting theater program during the epidemic, but

⁴¹ Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv, Intendanz Hoftheater 1052, report of the building commission, 17 February 1853.

⁴² In 1998, Tracy C. Davis broke new ground, providing new perspectives for performance historiography and theater architecture in the nineteenth century, by focussing on the sanitary facilities, economic motivations, epidemiological arguments and aesthetic changes. See Tracy C. Davis, “Filthy – Nay – Pestilential: Sanitation and Victorian Theaters,” in *Exceptional Spaces: Essays in Performance and History*, ed. Della Pollock (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 161–186.

⁴³ Banck, “Die Münchener Mustervorstellungen im Jahre 1854,” 401.

also efficiently acting against the very condition of the disease. Hence, in terms of miasmatic discourse, it made perfect sense in Munich, in 1854, with the cholera epidemic, to keep the theater open at any cost.

And the cost for the theater was indeed substantial. In a printed overview of the pieces performed, published at the end of the year, Dingelstedt points to the difficulties the theater faced in the “crisis year” of 1854:

Deviating from earlier custom, this year’s overview, before looking at the achievements of the Royal Court and National Theatre, must look back to the sufferings. It has not only been general and public calamities of the past year that have had, in many regards, a direct negative impact on the institution, but internally, particular and extraordinary circumstances have also interrupted planned and regular activities, and have generally and substantially compromised its overall efficiency. From the beginning of this year, one has had to struggle with all the insufficiencies of the new spaces and the unfamiliar equipment⁴⁴ that was installed during the restoration of the building within an extremely short time and which had only been finalized on 26 December. Also from the beginning of the year, indeed from the very first performance on [...], a long and constant series of more often than not tedious indispositions, sicknesses and extraordinary vacations of almost all of the main performers of all three art forms [drama, opera, ballet] have had lasting effects.⁴⁵

The new gas lighting posed technical problems that required constant adaptations and quick learning by the technicians. In addition, cholera made running a theater and performing a difficult business. Dingelstedt’s overview tries to justify the failures of his aesthetic and administrative ambitions in the eyes of the king and the general public. The budget ran a massive deficit until the end of the year, not least due to the fact that after the Queen Mother, Therese, became yet another victim of cholera on 26 October 1854, the theater had to remain closed for 14 days because of national mourning. Despite the grand success of the *Gesammt-Gastspiel*, this deficit had a severe impact on Dingelstedt’s reputation in the city. He was never able to re-balance the finances of the theater, which cost him the king’s trust. In 1857, he was finally dismissed from running the Munich Court and National Theatre. Nevertheless, he was able to pursue his career as a director at the Weimar Court Theatre and was later bestowed with the leader-

⁴⁴ Difficulties involved in fully operating the new lighting systems persisted for much longer. On 21 July 1855, Dingelstedt asked for the king’s permission to employ a new lighting technician with ample experience from his work at the Stuttgart Court Theatre, which had already introduced gas lighting in 1846. Dingelstedt admitted that Munich’s gas lighting was still operating on a very basic level, without ever achieving its full effect while incurring substantial costs. Hence, external expertise was urgently required. See Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv, Intendanz Hoftheater 1050/2, Gas, letter to the Royal House, 21 July 1855.

⁴⁵ Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv, Theaterzettel 1854, *Uebersicht der im K. Hof- und National-Theater vom 1. Januar bis 31. Dezember 1854 gegebenen Vorstellungen*.

ship of the Burgtheater in Vienna from 1870 until his death in 1881. During this time, he had to cope with cholera once more. In 1873, cholera returned to the continent and left 3,000 dead in Vienna alone.⁴⁶

To conclude, we can state that medical discourse on cholera was based on miasmatic thinking, and this not only had a considerable impact on the public sphere in Munich at the time of the epidemic, but also on cultural practices in and around the theater. Keeping the theater open was considered the right measure to both sustain the theater as an institution and to offer moral and hygienic support to its audiences. The newly renovated building, adjudged safe during the period, presented a pleasurable and comforting experience to compensate for the king's and the court's absence.

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

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⁴⁶ Again, the cholera epidemic can be attributed to an international event. In 1873, Vienna hosted the World Exhibition, and the first cases broke out amongst visitors staying at the appropriately named *Weltausstellungshotel* (Hotel of the World Exhibition).