

THE DOCTOR

A “very freely adapted” version of *Professor Bernhardt*, a play originally written in Vienna in 1912 by Arthur Schnitzler, currently is playing in London where it has been receiving rave reviews. Renamed *The Doctor*, its North American premiere will occur in June, 2023 for a limited engagement at the Park Avenue Armory in New York City. Adapted and directed by Robert Icke, *The Doctor* expands the play’s original anti-Semitic focus to include other forms of intolerance, e.g. racial identity, gender identity and sexuality. What follows here is excerpted from my book *More Meanderings in Medical History* that was published in 2012.

Michael Nevins

Arthur Schnitzler was a Jewish physician in *fin-de-siecle* Vienna who briefly worked as an assistant in his father’s successful laryngology practice. The Schnitzlers were a medical family and it was taken for granted that the young man would follow suit. However, he was unenthusiastic about the opportunity and, although he qualified in 1885, hospital medicine exacerbated Arthur’s tendency to hypochondria. He was never entirely committed to medical practice or to research so, having started to publish poems and short prose in the 1880s, he resigned his clinical post after his father’s death in 1893 and became a full-time professional writer. Arthur Schnitzler belonged to a group of Jewish intellectuals known as “Young Vienna” that included Stefan Zweig and Arnold Schoenberg. Freud, who described Schnitzler as his double, wrote “Whenever I get deeply absorbed in your beautiful creations I invariably seem to find beneath their poetic surface the very presuppositions, interests and conclusions which I know to be my own.”

Arthur Schnitzler’s works were often controversial because of their frank description of sexuality and he was branded as a pornographer after the release of his play *Reigen*, in which ten pairs of characters are shown before and after the sexual act with a prostitute. The furor caused by this play was couched in the strongest anti-Semitic terms, but in the 1930s, after it was made into a French language film, *La Ronde*, it achieved great success in the English-speaking world. Schnitzler meticulously kept a diary from the age of 17 until two days before his death in 1931. The manuscript, which ran to almost 8,000 pages, contained numerous descriptions of sexual conquests; often in relationships with several women at once, and for several years he kept a record of every orgasm. His works were called “Jewish filth” by Adolf Hitler and in 1933, when Joseph Goebbels organized book burnings in Berlin and other cities, Schnitzler’s works were thrown into flames along with those of other Jews, including Einstein, Marx, Kafka and Freud.

Arthur Schnitzler's play *Professor Bernhardi* had an ironic subtitle: "A Comedy in Five Acts" but there was nothing remotely funny about it — rather, the play resembled a Greek tragedy. Schnitzler's father taught him that the religion of the doctor is the love of mankind and in his various plays and novels he described the plight of the assimilated Jewish bourgeoisie who idealized egalitarian principles at a time when liberalism was disintegrating before a rising tide of Austrian nationalism and anti-Semitism.

The protagonist Professor Oskar Bernhardi, was a Jewish internist who heads a small hospital. He's scrupulously honest but finds himself in conflict with his hospital's administration. The play was set in Vienna in 1900 at a time when Jews constituted nearly ten percent of the city's population and about half of all doctors. Bernhardi naively puts his patients' interests first in the belief that the only essential for a doctor is to serve humanity and science. He is undone when he refuses to allow a priest to give the sacraments to a young woman who is dying as a result of a septic abortion. In a terminal state of euphoria, she believes that she's getting better and the doctor prefers the subterfuge of withholding the true prognosis, thereby allowing her to die happily. But instead of being praised for an act of mercy, he's accused of sacrilege and the event becomes a *cause celebre*.

The impractical Professor Bernhardi loses his job and his license and is briefly jailed. He'd only wished to practice what he considered to be good honest medicine, but was blind to social and political currents that characterized Viennese society. As Bernhardi sees it, when there's a battle between religion and medicine then rationality should prevail. However, he gets caught up in intrigue and hypocrisy among his colleagues and the hospital's administration. One gentile doctor cynically attempts to set him straight:

There are still among you gentlemen [Jews] who do not know how to read the signs of the times and to reckon with popular tendencies...The fact is that there are many people who do not consider it right that in an institution where a Prince and a Bishop are curators, and where according to statistics 85% of the patients are Catholics, the house-doctors should in preponderating numbers belong to another religion. That sort of thing causes bad blood in certain quarters.

Arthur Schnitzler believed that anti-Semitism was a response to the Jew's historical position as outsiders. He derided those who hid their identities and placed his faith in Enlightenment values rather than on Zionist nationalism. He remained hopeful about the prospect of Jewish survival, trusting that salvation would come by greater assimilation, adaptation and self-reliance.

Sadly, the Enlightenment's commitment to tolerance was more theory than practice and there were limits to acceptance into German society. Before the play could open in 1912 it was banned by Austrian censors and the Viennese premiere had to wait until December 1918, by which point what it meant to be Austrian had radically changed. As Schnitzler remarked in his diary: "Very gratifying – but somewhat costly: it has taken a World War and a Revolution to make this production possible."

Unlike Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* (1882), another "doctor play" in which the contaminated water source was a metaphor for political corruption, the many references to syphilis in *Professor Bernhardt* weren't presented as symptoms of broader social malaise, and the young woman dying of sepsis – the word literally means putrefaction – was not intended as a symbol of something rotten in the state of Austria.

Arthur Schnitzler didn't live to see how mistaken he was. He died of a stroke two years before Hitler assumed power and seven years before the Nazis annexed Austria. In 1938, after Hitler entered Vienna, the Burgtheater announced, 'The day has come on which the stage of the Burgtheater is to be cleansed of the Judenschmutz, which was dumped there by Schnitzler and his consorts.' In 1941 at a celebration of Schnitzler's birthday that was held ten years after his death, a Viennese emigre described Schnitzler as 'one of the voices that sound above the chaos, because their ring is so pure, because their prophecy is so true, because their humanity is so great.'

The first English language production of *Professor Bernhardt* wasn't given until 1936 and the play rarely has been produced in this country except for a brief off-Broadway repertory production in New York City in 2012. However, Schnitzler's play remains popular in Austria where it is performed every other year at Vienna's national theater, the Burgtheater. In 2013 a modern adaptation, renamed *The Doctor*, will debut in New York City.)

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2012

Arthur Schnitzler
Professor Bernhardt

Komödie in fünf Akten



HOFENBERG SONDERAUSGABE