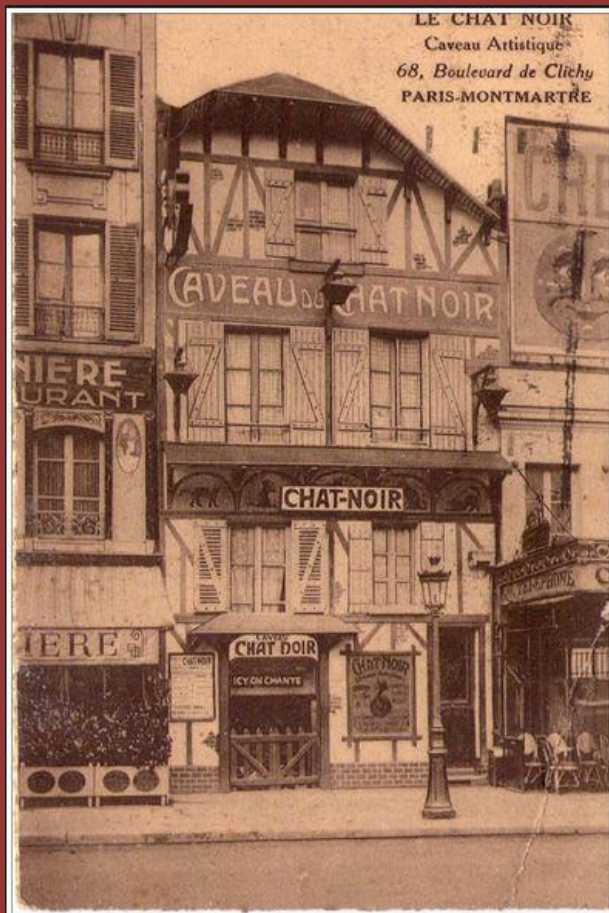


Take a peek...

You'll be surprised when you visit me in the historic Commissariat in Mainz. I'm anything but the cliché of a dusty archive. Despite my youth, I am a classic, if I may say so myself. Permit me to present myself in over a thousand square feet of downright museum elegance. Just for you, of course! After all, I have a mission. In the cultural interest of the public. I preserve an entire genre, a unique art form, so to speak! My founder registered me in the family genealogy as a "documentation center for German-language satire." Just after he arrived in Mainz in 1961, he proudly named me the "German Cabaret Archives."

Since that day, my staff has been dedicating themselves to the performance forms and manifestations of satire around the world. That's why we so often greet international visitors. Recently a student from Moscow was here to hunt for material from the 1920s for her doctoral dissertation, and a professor from Japan was interested in the cabaret in exile.

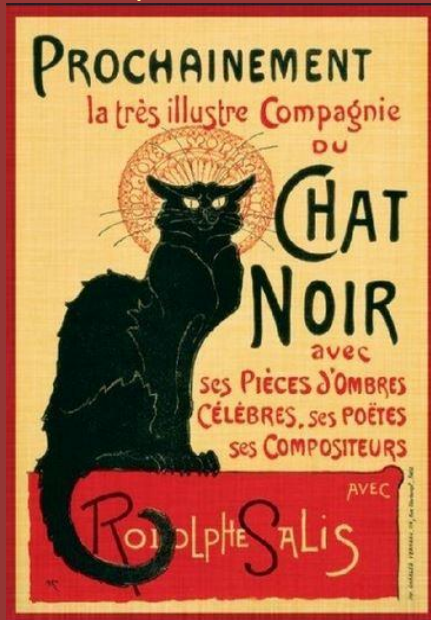


Once a doctoral candidate from Yale University spent nine months in the bowels of the archives tracing the role of the medieval troubadour as an ancestor of the political singer-songwriter. Written inquiries from all over the world testify to the great interest in my treasures. That's why I was able to open over 160 exhibits since the beginning of the 21st century, in seven European countries. Including France. In the Maison Heinrich Heine of the Cité Universitaire Internationale de Paris: "Le Monde, un Cabaret – Les débuts du cabaret littéraire en Allemagne et en France." Montpellier, Toulouse, Lyon, and Dijon followed. In the German-speaking regions, we toured with "100 Years of Cabaret" from Alzey to Zurich. That exhibit shows what I have to offer: the genre! Its manifestations. Their history. It's about the artists. Especially about the political-literary cabaret as an art striving for democracy and freedom. It's about the authors. Their life stories. All too often they were stories of suffering. It's

about their relevance for interested people from all eras. For the audience of the Belle Epoque. Of the imperial era. Between revolution and censorship. Between the First and Second World Wars. Between democracy and dictatorship, militarism and fascism. It's about the art of survival. In exile and under cover. Between styles and between political

parties. It's about our culture. About its transformations. About education. And of course it's about laughter. Laughter at ourselves and at everyone else. It's about the topography of mockery and its language through the changes of the times. Just like it's about the humor and poetry of our human experience. About the absurd and the concrete. About criticism of current affairs in artistic form. And last but not least, it's about entertainment too. From the very beginning. And about love! Collecting, by the way, is a form of love, the American philosopher George Steiner once said.

The cabaret's composite form of different stage genres has, in a formal sense, only existed since the end of the nineteenth century. This mixture is symbolized by the lovely French term "cabaret." That means, on the one hand, a pub, a little bar, and that includes its intimate character. On the other hand, it means a divided salad platter, an hors d'oeuvres tray. The sections around it represent the different stage arts: music, theater, dance, sketches, even painting. After some predecessors like the "Cabarets des Assassins," where they sang street ballads about murderers, it was Rodolphe Salis, originally a painter, who climbed up onto a barrel one night in the fall of 1891 in his pub "Chat Noir" in Montmartre



and announced the performances of various artists for his well-heeled audience. That was the birth of what the world now knows as the topical, literary cabaret! As the founder of the so-called Cabarets Artistiques, Salis was the first of his guild of emcees. You could call him the connecting sauce in the center dish of the divided salad platter. His commentaries were notorious! Sometimes insulting, aggressive, just like the songs sung there. But that's what attracted the intellectual public of Paris. Soon the intellectual elite climbed up to the "Butte sacré." Politicians and aristocrats followed. For example, Victor Hugo and Émile Zola; the Italian freedom fighter Giuseppe Garibaldi came, as did Prince Jérôme Bonaparte, the great-nephew of the great Napoleon and the nephew of Napoleon III. Many singers, composers, and performers of great talent appeared, most of whom later became

famous, for instance Aristide Bruant and Yvette Guilbert, the first disease of the French cabaret. Her male counterpart Aristide continued his career in his establishment "Le Mirliton" with socially critical songs aimed at the hypocrisy of the propertied bourgeoisie. Thanks to a poster by Henri-Lautrec, he's world famous today. Two Chat Noir posters from 1895 recently arrived in my graphic cabinets, joining all the others, almost twenty thousand artifacts from all eras of the twentieth century. It all started with a segment of the population that loved art and culture. Cabaret was, at least for the bohemians, the medium of choice. The author Otto Julius Bierbaum proclaimed: "The renaissance of all the arts and of life from the music hall! We'll dance up a new culture! We'll give birth to Superman in the honky-tonk! We'll knock this silly world on its butt!" He meant it seriously! Unfortunately, it was other people who knocked the world down. But still, it



was something new for 1900! It was the era of new beginnings, of new inspirations: mankind as beings hurled into time. The world as a cabaret! Like art nouveau, this new art form gave rise to a downright movement—it was “in” and “en vogue,” and it became a



fashion that soon swept into Berlin. Here the conservative baron Ernst von Wolzogen had a hit with his “Überbrett!” on January 18, 1901, the thirtieth anniversary of the founding of the Second German Empire. The theater regulations of this stage are in our archives.

Soon afterward, the “Eleven Executioners” entered the scene in Munich: the first real political cabaret in Germany. Frank Wedekind joined the eleven, as did Marc Henry, who hailed from Paris. So my immediate ancestors come from France on my mother’s side and from the German Empire on my father’s side. A European mishmash just like old royalty... And then it went fast! By 1901 forty locales had developed along the Spree river with programs of literary cabaret. In Vienna, “Zum lieben Augustin” (Dear Augustine), the “Nachtlcht” (the Nightlight), and the “Fledermaus” (the Bat) opened. Frida Strindberg, whose first child was fathered by August Strindberg and her second by Frank Wedekind, founded

the first cabaret in London. Before that, Barcelona had “El quatre Gats.” Cracow, Warsaw, Budapest, and St. Petersburg: cabarets on the French model developed all the way to Moscow. Wherever business savvy and a knack for artistry were lacking, though, a newly opened locale often quickly failed. But the upswing prevailed. At first. Typical for this young art form, as originally in Paris, was the pub stage, the podium for the so-called vagants or goliards. Here the dream of the artistic bohemians was realized: presenting their own works, free and outside of the established art business. The immediacy of this art form on stage is fascinating. Theater pretended things for the audience, but in the cabaret they

speak directly to the audience! Salaries for the performers were generally rare. Most people got paid in food and drink. Or they passed around a collection plate. Apropos troubadours: the models and roots went way back into the middle ages. Moral and satirical poetry, love and drinking songs of the so-called *Erzpoeten*, the earliest poets. In Hanns Dieter Hüsch’s “Arche Nova,” the role of the “archipoeta” was honored in the very first program booklet with one of his songs from the twelfth century. The most important collection, about three hundred songs, discovered in 1803 in the Benediktbeuren monastery and called “Songs of Beuren,” gained international fame with a new musical setting: *Carmina Burana*. Troubadour poetry as an extravagant oratorio, timeless thanks to Carl Orff’s brilliant music.



The artistic bohemians themselves are a product of their time. And so these new cabarets live from and for the moment. Only the “Simplicissimus” in Munich is a long-lived success, run by a very competent female emcee who was also an ingenious businesswoman: Kathi

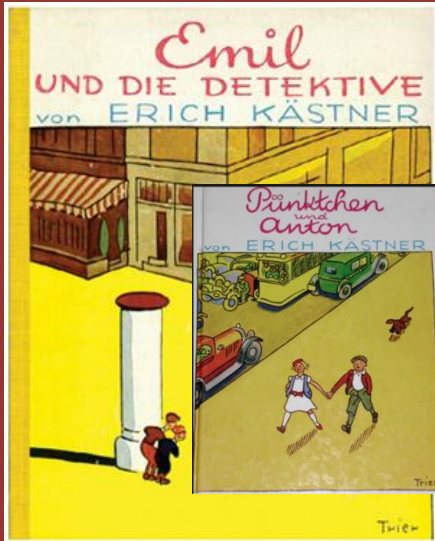
Kobus manages to synthesize art and commerce. The “Simpl” runs for fifty-six years, from 1903 to 1968—a time span that few cabarets have managed to match until today. And who hung out there there before the First World War? Just about everybody, and the stylish elite of Munich! Tourists from abroad, the Prince of Wales, Czar Ferdinand of Bulgaria, the King of Belgium, captains of industry, wealthy aristocrats. Wilhelm Voigt, the shoemaker who made a name for himself as the “Captain of Köpenick,” appears for money in the Simpl and sells his autograph. And a certain Hans Bötticher. He’s a regular, then the house author, and later he became famous as Joachim Ringelnatz.

On my fiftieth birthday, a sweet, elderly lady gave me a gift, the “Golden Book of the Catacombs.” In 1929, her late husband Tibor Kasics had co-founded the cabaret “Katakombe” (the Catacombs) with Werner Finck in Berlin. In this wonderful gift there’s an amusing dedication by Joachim Ringelnatz, as well as an original drawing by Walter Trier, who illustrated the books of Erich Kästner. There are autographs and aphorisms ranging from Hans Albers to Carl Zuckmayer, by Klaus and Heinrich Mann, Walter Hasenclever and George Grosz, Max Reinhardt, Erich Mühsam, Gustav Gründgens, Luigi Pirandello and Erwin Piscator alongside Alfred Döblin and Richard Huelsenbeck.

The latter came up with the Dada recipe for cabaret: “Dada is the cabaret of the world, just as the world, the cabaret, is Dada.” In the “Cabaret Voltaire” in Zurich, Hugo Ball

invented that literary form as a challenge to the bourgeoisie’s apathy toward the horror of the First World War. After 1918, Kurt Tucholsky and Walter Mehring were the foremost cabaret authors, the chroniclers of an abandoned republic and champions of aggressive satire, who also wrote lyric poetry or hilarious humor to entertain their audience. For Bert Brecht, the cabaret served as an inspiration for his theory of epic theater. With the ditties of Otto Reutter or the songs of Friedrich Hollaender and Rudolf Nelson, sung by stars the likes of Claire Waldoff and Marlene Dietrich, the cabaret made its mark on the opulent revues and the music hall stage, especially in Berlin. In Munich, cabaret took the popular-absurd form of the uprooted humorist of the sorrowful countenance, Karl Valentin. And in 1932, a year before Hitler came to power, Werner Finck stands bashfully smiling on the stage and looks straight ahead. He’s imagining what will happen when the Nazis take over, and he predicts, “In the first weeks of the Third Reich, parades will be held. If these parades are interrupted by rain, hail or snow, all the Jews in the vicinity will be shot.” This punchline, we would soon see, was no joke.

When the Nazis come to power, Finck tries to embody humor as resistance. Hundreds of cabaret performers and satirists spend the “Thousand-Year Reich” in concentration camps. As a sampling, remember the artists that are honored with a satire star outside my front door on Romano Guardini Square in Mainz: Erich Mühsam, Fritz Grünbaum, and Kurt Geron. They were murdered in Oranienburg, Dachau, and Auschwitz.



After May 8, 1945, cabaret enjoyed a genuine rebirth. In the western zones of “Trizonesien,” they sang with a taunting, melancholy tone: “Hurra, we’re still alive.” In the “Kom(m)ödchen” in Dusseldorf, the cabaret set new political and literary standards. Erich Kästner started writing again in Munich, and Günter Neumann’s radio cabaret “Die Insulaner” (the Islanders) at Berlin’s American broadcaster RIAS leapt into the cold war. With Wolfgang Neuss, the cabaret drummed the consequences of suppression and the economic miracle into the West German conscience, and at Munich’s “Lach- und Schiessgesellschaft” and the Berlin “Stachelschweine” (the Porcupines), they celebrated the new year in television style. In this way, cabaret becomes popular with a broad middle-class audience. Back then, television was behind the boom of political cabaret. In East Germany, for four decades, cabaret adapted to the limits of everyday censorship—convinced, when push came to shove, of the superiority of socialism. That’s a story in its own right, which now has its own roof over its head for collecting and documenting the history of cabaret in the GDR, in Bernburg Castle on the Saale River. In West Germany of the Sixties, Franz-Josef Degenhardt sang out against the rise of neo-Nazis; the cabaret of the APO, the extra-parliamentary opposition, agitated into the troubled Seventies; and finally, Hanns Dieter Hüsch’s “Hagenbuch” declared everyone and everything sick and insane.



In the Eighties, cabaret rollicked through the young Sponti activist and alternative scene as the “Three Tornadoes.” With Thomas Freitag, it unceasingly parodied Chancellor Kohl, the inventor of *Realsatire*, true events that are so absurd they seem like satire, “in this here land of ours,” while with Gerhard Polt it performed an autopsy on our mental roots, and with Richard Rogler, it survived the new intellectual-moral freedom through cynicism, and on the growing commercial television networks, it discovered its market value. Since then, it has



been wavering between cabaret and comedy, between meaningful political commitment and a heightened sense of profit, between Germany’s intimate stages and huge arenas. Over a hundred years later, that old “Jest, Satire, Irony and Deeper Significance” (to play on Christian Dietrich Grabbe’s comedy) with which one once hoped to topple the status quo fell prey more and more to the rules of commercial entertainment. The country has changed. New paradigms are

everywhere. But that’s how it always was throughout the eras. Even constitutions don’t live up to their promises. Everything has its premises, its developments, its transitions. And eventually it has its cultural history—which I document for the cabaret. And so, *Willkommen! Bienvenue! Welcome!* Take a peek. Take your time. Make a reservation. Visit us. Maybe we will meet one day!

Yours truly,
The German Cabaret Archives

(Translated by Alan Lareau)