

Puss in boots, Ludwig Tieck, 1797

Prologue

The scene is laid in the pit. The candles have been lit; the musicians are gathered in the orchestra. The theatre is full; there is a bedlam of chatter; more members of the audience are arriving; several are pushing, others are complaining. The musicians are tuning their instruments.

FISCHER, MÜLLER, SCHLOSSER, BÖTTICHER are in the pit; WIESENER and WIESENER'S NEIGHBOR are on the other side of the pit.

Fischer

Say, but I'm curious, Müller, what is your opinion of these contemporary plays?

Müller

I think the sky will fall in before we are likely to see such a play at our great theatre—our National Theatre! Indeed! Think of all the periodicals, the sumptuous costumes, and the endless expenses!

Fischer

Are you familiar with this piece?

Müller

Not at all. A strange title that: *Puss in Boots*. I do hope they're not going to perform the children's play.

Schlosser

A fairy-tale? For Heaven's sake, they must think we are mere children if that's the sort of piece they are going to put on? They surely won't bring an actual cat onto the stage, will they?

Fischer

As far as I can make out, it's an imitation of *The New Arcadians*. The villain of the piece is a monstrous cat, a sort of Tarkaleon, except that his mouth is black rather than red.

Müller

Now that wouldn't be bad, for it has long been my desire to see such a wonderful opera without music for once.

Fischer

What? Without music! Such a thing would be absurd without music, my dear friend. I assure you, dear Sir, it is only when such absurdities are seasoned with the heavenly art of music that we can swallow them at all. Strictly speaking, of course, we are beyond such childish nonsense, such superstition. The Enlightenment has borne its natural fruits, as is right and proper.

Müller

It may turn out to be a traditional portrait of domestic life, and the cat is just a joke, a sort of enticing jest, so to speak; an inducement, if I may call it that; a bizarre title to attract a crowd.

Schlosser

To tell you my honest opinion, I take the whole thing to be a trick to spread certain opinions and sentiments among the people. You'll see if I'm not right. A revolutionary play, as far as I can see, with egregious princes and ministers, and then a highly mystical man who joins a secret society in a cellar deep underground, where he goes about disguised as, say, the president, so that the common rabble take him for a tomcat. In any case, we are then given a dose of profound and religious philosophy and Freemasonry. Finally, he is sacrificed for a higher cause. O you noble Puss! Of course you must be in boots if you are to give all the villains a good kick up their unfeeling arses!

Fischer

Yes, I think you must be right, for otherwise it would be in very bad taste. At any rate, I must confess I never could believe in witches or ghosts, much less a *Puss in Boots*.

Müller

The age of such phantoms is past.

Schlosser

But it depends on the circumstances. Could not a deceased nobleman in a truly desperate plight wander unrecognized as a house-cat throughout his palace, miraculously revealing his identity at the right time? That would be entirely reasonable, if it served higher and mystical ends. —But here comes Leutner; perhaps he can tell us more.

LEUTNER pushes his way through the crowd.

Leutner

Good evening, good evening! How are you?

Müller

Do tell us, will you, what sort of play we're having tonight?

The music begins.

Leutner

They're only starting now? It seems I've come in the nick of time. —Tonight's play? I have just been speaking with the author; he is onstage now helping the cat to dress.

Many Voices

Helping? —The author? —The cat? —So a cat will be appearing onstage, after all?

Leutner

Yes, indeed! Why, his name is even on the playbill.

Fischer

So who's playing the cat?

Leutner

The foreign actor, of course, the great man.

Bötticher

Then we are in for a heavenly treat. Oh, how this genius, who experiences all his roles so intimately and portrays them with such subtle nuances, will sculpt for us a cat out of his very being! An ideal cat, as the ancients would understand it, no doubt, not unlike Pygmalion, only here we will have the soccus rather than the cothurnus . But boots are surely buskins and not socks. I am still not sure which of the two we are to have tonight. —Pardon me, gentlemen, just a little room for my writing table and remarks.

Müller

But how can they possibly put on such nonsense?

Leutner

The author thinks that, for a change— —

Fischer

A nice change! Why not do Bluebeard too, and *Little Red Riding Hood* or *Hop-o-My-Thumb* ? Indeed! Fine subjects for a drama!

Müller

But how are they going to dress the cat? — Is he actually going to be wearing boots?

Leutner

I'm just as eager to find out as you are.

Fischer

But do we really want them to perform such stuff for us? We've come here out of curiosity, to be sure, but, still, we have taste.

Müller

I have a good mind to kick up a fuss.

Leutner

It is rather cold, too. I'll set the ball rolling.

He stamps his feet; the others accompany him.

Wiesener
on the other side

What are you making such a racket for?

Leutner

We're trying to save good taste.

Wiesener

Really! Well, count me in too.

He stamps his feet.

Voices

Be quiet ! We can't hear the music.

Everyone stamps.

Schlosser

But, I say, we really ought to let them play the piece right through to end. After all, we've given them our money and this will be our only chance to see this play. But afterwards we'll kick up such a fuss that they'll hear us out in the street.

All

No! Now! Now! — Good taste— rules— art— otherwise everything will go to rack and ruin.

A CANDLE-SNUFFER appears on the stage.

Candle-Snuffer

Gentlemen! Must we send in the police?

Leutner

We've paid good money to be here, we're the audience, and therefore we demand to have our own good taste and no farces.

Candle-Snuffer

But this stamping is rude, and it shows that you have no taste. Here we only allow applause and admiration; respectable theaters like ours here do not grow on trees, you know.

Playwright
Backstage

The play will begin presently.

Müller

No play— we want no play— we want good taste— .

All

Good taste! Good taste!

Playwright

I am confused;— what do you mean, if I may be so bold as to inquire?

Schlosser

Good taste! — You a poet, and you do not even know what good taste means?

Playwright

Be considerate, I'm young, a beginner— —

Schlosser

Don't talk to us about beginners- we want to see a proper play- a play in good taste!

Playwright

What sort of play? What genre?

Müller

Domestic stories.

Leutner

Rescue stories.

Fischer

Ethics and German sentiments.

Schlosser

Religious edification, beneficent secret societies.

Wiesener

Hussites and children.

Wiesener's Neighbor

Right! And cherries too, and quartermasters!

THE PLAYRIGHT comes out from behind the curtain

Playwright

Gentlemen— —

All

Is that the author?

Fischer

He doesn't look much like a writer.

Schlosser

Impudent fellow!

Playwright

Gentlemen—forgive my boldness.

Fischer

How can you write such pieces? Why haven't you educated yourself?

Playwright

Grant me a hearing before you condemn me—just one minute. I know that the honorable public must pass judgment on the author, and that there can be no leave of appeal; but I also know how much the

honorable public loves justice, and I know that they will not frighten me away from a course in which I am in sore need of their guidance and good judgment.

Fischer

He's not a bad speaker.

Müller

He's more courteous than I expected.

Schlosser

He has respect for the public, after all.

Playwright

I am ashamed to present the modest inspiration of my Muse before such enlightened judges; it is only the skill of our actors which still consoles me to some extent; otherwise I would sink into despair without further ado.

Fischer

I feel sorry for him.

Müller

He's a fine fellow!

Playwright

When I heard your worthy stamping—why, nothing has ever frightened me so much! I'm still pale and shaking. I don't know how I ever mustered up the courage to appear before you.

Leutner

Well, clap, then!

Everyone applauds.

Playwright

I wanted to try and amuse you by means of humor, cheerfulness and, dare I say it, buffoonery. I hope I have been successful, as our newest plays so seldom afford us an opportunity to laugh.

Müller

That's certainly true! Leutner He's right. — That man is absolutely right.

Schlosser

Bravo! Bravo! All Bravo! Bravo!

They applaud.

Playwright

It is up to you, honored sirs, to decide now whether my attempt is to be rejected entirely. Trembling, I withdraw. Let the play begin.

He bows very respectfully and disappears behind the curtain.

All

Bravo! Bravo!

Voices from the Gallery

Da capo!

Everyone laughs. The music begins again, as the curtain rises.

About the artists:

SARAH MARGNETTI

Receiving her BA from ECAL in Lausanne and her MA from HEAD in Geneva, Sarah Margnetti (b. 1983 in Monthey, lives and works in Brussels and Lausanne) went on to get a technical training at The Van der Kelen-Logelain Institute in Brussels, one of the first schools dedicated to the study of decorative painting. Founded in 1882, it's also one of the few places where art education is not about free expression, but about learning one strict, ancient discipline. Mastering the technique of trompe l'oeil, Margnetti has developed a virtuous painting style that combines optical illusions and abstract motives. Margnetti has shown her work in solo and duo shows at LastTango, Zurich (2019), Bombon Projects, Barcelona (2018) and at Silicon Malley, Lausanne (2016). Her work was confronted with Kiki Kogelnik's at SALTS, Basel (2016) in a show curated by Elise Lammer and Samuel Leuenberger. Group exhibitions include the Swiss Art Award 2018 (Basel), the Espace d'Art Contemporain Les Halles (Porrentruy), the Penthouse Art Residency (Brussels), Deborah Bowmann (Brussels), the Swiss Institute in Rome (Italy) and the "Les Urbaines" festival (Lausanne).

TANJA NIS-HANSEN

Tanja Nis-Hansen (b.1988, lives and works in Berlin) studied at the Academy of Fine Art, Vienna before achieving her BFA and MFA at the Academy of Fine Art, Hamburg with professor Jutta Koether. Her praxis is hugely influenced by the tradition of theatre and she's interested in creating a meeting point ^{between} painting and performance. Nis-Hansen has shown her work in solo exhibitions at Come Over Chez Malik's (2017) and at the Golden Pudel Club (2015) both in Hamburg. Recent group exhibitions include Crum Heaven, Stockholm (2019), Rumpelstiltskin, New York, Galleria Federico Vavassori, Milan, Munchener Kammerspiele, Munich (2018), and Halle fur Kunst, Luneburg (2017). She was awarded a grant by the Danish Art Council in 2019, after being nominated for the Hanburger Arbeitsstipendium, the Hiscox Kunstpreis and the Schues Nachwuchsforrderung all in 2018.

GEORGIA SOWERBY

Georgia Sowerby (b.1991) received her BA with honors from the Wimbledon College of Art in 2014, before achieving her MA at the Slade School of FineArt, London in 2018. In her own words, her practice "parasites" art history, the occult and feminist theory to investigate the gap between visual imagery and language. Recent exhibitions include Block 336 (solo), SET Space Bermondsey, and Belmacz Gallery, all in London. She was awarded the Almacantar Studio Award in 2018 and the Felix Slade Scholarship in 2016. Georgia Sowerby currently lives and works in London.