

Bloomers (English Version from German 1911)

From the brilliant Spanking Website [MainstreamSpanking](#)

The Bloomers

[May 17, 2015](#) [Harry](#)

It's not unusual for a spanking scene to come at the very end of its play: the girl misbehaves in the course of the story, and then retribution descends just before the final curtain. But it's relatively uncommon for a play to *begin* with a spanking, as the German comedy *The Bloomers* does:

Enter Theobald and Luise

THEOBALD: I'm not going crazy!

LUISE: Put the stick away.

Theobald spansks her

THEOBALD: Shamed by the gossip of the neighbors, of the whole district! Mrs Maske has lost her bloomers!

LUISE: Ow! Ouch!

THEOBALD: In the open street, in front of the King himself! And me just a lowly official!

LUISE (squealing): Enough!

The reason she is being spanked becomes clearer in the course of subsequent dialogue. Theobald Maske and his wife have been to watch a royal procession. She was stretching to catch a glimpse of the Kaiser when she suffered a misfortune that was later much exploited by the 1950s pin-up artist Art Frahm:

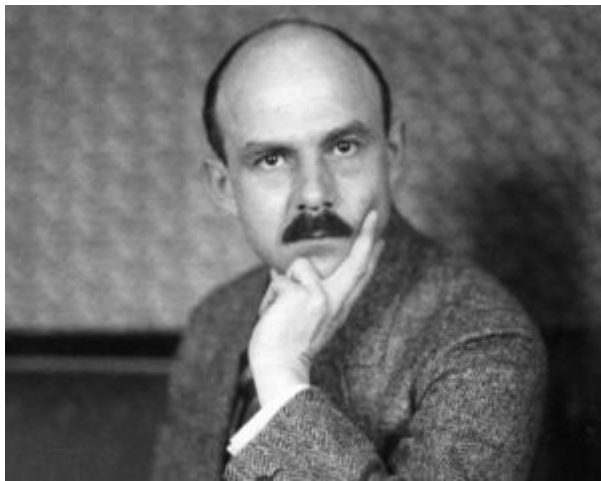


Her bloomers fell down in public! Theobald is furious, because he fears the scandal will cost him his job – hence the reprisals he takes when he gets Luise home. In fact, almost everyone was watching the procession, but two men did happen to be looking at Frau Maske, and it is no coincidence that immediately afterwards they turn up at Theobald's house, rent rooms there and eventually make improper advances to Luise. Meanwhile, Luise has to find herself some new bloomers, and accepts a neighbor's offer to make her a very pretty pair. So, the incident of the unexpectedly descending undergarments is what sets the plot of the play in motion. But since that could not be conveniently represented on stage, for practical as well

as censorship reasons, the play needed to start off with some other striking theatrical moment that would establish the event and its importance.

But the structural positioning of the spanking also affects its own impact and meaning. In a conventional narrative (as distinct from erotica), a spanking is always a *response* to something, and its reputation as the ‘ultimate punishment’ means it is often a last resort: that’s why its natural place is often near the end, after whatever it is that the girl has done to earn it. In contrast, in *The Bloomers* we witness the spanking first: we are presented with it as an action in its own right, and only then learn what it was a reaction to. In consequence, we may feel that is not an entirely proportionate reaction: wouldn’t it be more appropriate for Theobald to give his wife some sympathy for her embarrassment, rather than compounding it with the humiliation of a spanking?

Before the play was called *The Bloomers*, its original title was *Der Riese* (The Giant), a reference to Theobald which is only half-ironical: the author, Carl Sternheim (1878-1942)...



... later said that it was about ‘the heroic lives of the bourgeoisie’, a heroism which consists in achieving the freedom of being true to your own self, no matter how appallingly antisocial your behavior might be. Theobald is a little man whose only power lies in his own household, and whose domination of his wife is underpinned by physical force; later on he threatens her, ‘Stop chattering or I’ll spank your bottom so hard that you won’t be able to speak for weeks.’ If he is in some sense a giant, he is also an ogre.

Sternheim’s inspiration came from Moliere: he had seen a production of *George Dandin* in Paris in 1909 and decided to emulate its attention to the trivialities of ordinary life, using a contemporary German setting: ‘middle-class bloomers and five Philistines arguing about it’. He finished the draft in July 1910 and offered it to Max Reinhardt, the director of the Deutsches Theater, Berlin. We have already met Reinhardt in this series: he was responsible for the first production of [Spring Awakening](#). He accepted Sternheim’s play in October 1910, but with a change of title: it was now to be called *Die Hose*.

The play’s translator, Eric Bentley, was flummoxed by the German word *Hose*, which encompasses the multiple meanings of the word *pants* on both sides of the Atlantic. He pointed out that an appropriate British title might be *The Knickers*, but to avoid confusing his American readership he opted instead for *The Underpants*. But that throws away almost as much connotation as if he had called it *The Passion-Killers* – something that certainly isn’t

true of Luise Maske's undergarments! *The Underpants* has, unfortunately, stuck to the play in English, though, as we shall see, that may not matter very much to us. But it's a mystery why Bentley didn't think of the obvious solution to his problem, a word conveying both the garment's femininity and its period: *The Bloomers*!

Max Reinhardt's production went into rehearsal in January 1911, but hit trouble on February 11 when the city's police chief, the ultra-conservative Traugott von Jagow, banned it on the suspicion that it might be immoral. Reinhardt responded by inviting von Jagow to attend a dress rehearsal and see for himself and arranged for him to be sitting next to the actress Tilla Durieux. Whenever the action on stage became at all dubious, she contrived to distract his attention in conversation! We know that it worked, for two reasons. Firstly, the ban was quickly rescinded (on February 15) and the play staged. And secondly, von Jagow asked to see Tilla Durieux again, and wound up embroiled in a sex scandal!

The play then went through the predictable run of controversy and censorship – banned in Munich in 1912, banned in Berlin by the city's military governor in 1915 – before establishing itself as a classic of modern German theater. A silent film version was made in 1927, with Werner Krauss as Theobald and Jenny Jugo as Luise:



Later in the last century, German television versions were more plentiful than you might expect, partly owing to the country's 45 years of bifurcation after the Second World War. There were East German productions in 1962, with Gerhard Bienert and Margarete Taudte...



... 1967, with Hans-Joachim Hanisch and Angelica Domröse...



... and 1986, with Günter Junghans and Swetlana Schönfeld...



West German viewers had the chance to see the play in 1965, with Martin Held and Karin Kleine, and again in 1985, with Angelica Domröse reprising her role from eighteen years earlier on the other side of the Berlin Wall, and this time being spanked by her real-life husband, Hilmar Thate:



As always when dealing with the German verb *schlagen* and the possibility of a stick being used, the staging and appeal of the spanking scene can vary enormously between productions, as we are about to see. At Hanover in 2012, Luise was played by Juliane Fisch:



Here she is being whacked by Aljoscha Stadelmann:



In the same year, in the Swiss director Pia Hänggi's production at the Heppenheim Festival, Luise was played by Viola Wedekind:



Her Theobald was Achim Stellwagen:



Perhaps it's worth reminding ourselves that Viola really is exceptionally pretty...



... not just for its own sake but also because she has a track record of being spanked on stage: in 2005-6 she appeared at the Schlosstheater, Celle, playing the lead in *Kiss Me Kate*!

And the play is still being produced in Germany. Right now it's playing at the Theater Willy Praml in Frankfurt. You may wish to take a look at the trailer:

Venturing into productions beyond the German-speaking world yields mixed results when it comes to the spanking scene. In recent years, Britain and America are a dead loss, thanks to the work of one man, comedian Steve Martin, who administered one of the most inept cinema spankings in *All of Me* (1984)...



... and who adapted Sternheim's play in 2002. Publicists now regularly invite prospective audiences to 'come and see Steve Martin's *Underpants*', an unenticing offer if ever there was one. But what they will not be able to see in the Steve Martin version is the spanking scene!

Never mind. Go east – there are spankings there! In the 1994 production at the Radnóti Theater, Budapest, Luise was played by Ildikó Tóth...



... and she was soundly whacked by Sándor Gáspár:

It's lucky for her she managed to get her bloomers back on beforehand!

And in 2010, in the same city, Péter Valló directed the play at the Petofi Theater as part of the Vidor Festival. Mária Dobra was Luise:



And what she experienced at the hands of, and across the lap of, Tamás Szalma must count as the very best staging we have seen:



Is it any wonder that the poor dear's having trouble sitting down afterwards?

