

George W. Brandt

An Eighteenth-Century Performance Analysis: Böttiger on Iffland

Trained under Ekhof at Gotha, the German actor August Wilhelm Iffland began his professional career in 1779 at the Mannheim Court Theatre. He moved to Berlin to become director of the National Theatre in 1796, remaining there till his death in 1814. In between, he paid a guest visit to the Weimar Court Theatre, at the invitation of its presiding genius, Goethe. A local schoolmaster, Karl August Böttiger, published an account of several of his roles. This was, for its times, an evocative and unusually detailed record of performance style, and here George Brandt complements his analysis with extensive quotation. George Brandt, currently a Senior Research Fellow of the University of Bristol, joined the Drama Department there in 1951, served as its Head of Department over a number of years, and shaped much of its policy, creating among other things the first practical postgraduate film course at a British university. He edited *British Television Drama* (1981) and *British Television Drama in the 1980s* (1993) for Cambridge University Press. His *German and Dutch Theatre, 1600–1848* (1993), with Wiebe Hogendoorn, was part of the CUP series 'Theatre in Europe', and *Modern Theories of Drama* was published by Oxford University Press in 1998.

IN 1796 the Weimar headmaster Karl August Böttiger published a booklet, all but forgotten now, in which he described a number of stage performances given at the local playhouse by a distinguished visitor. Should this opusculum by a man who was also a classical scholar, archaeologist, and art historian be rescued from the oblivion of two centuries? Or has this long silence been well deserved? I suggest it may be worthwhile dusting it off (lightly) and looking at it again (briefly) for the following reasons.

First reason. The object of Böttiger's study, August Wilhelm Iffland (1759–1814), was seen by many of his German contemporaries as an outstanding, perhaps *the* outstanding, actor of his day. Aged thirty-six at the time of the visit, Iffland had reached something near the top of his profession in the German-speaking world. He had also achieved fame as the prolific author of quintessentially bourgeois plays that were sure-fire box-office successes.

Second reason. The performances which Böttiger put under his critical magnifying glass had recently taken place at the Ducal Court Theatre of Weimar – associated (retrospectively at any rate) with a great period in

German drama. The presiding genius there was, of course, Goethe, who combined, with the left hand as it were, theatrical direction and management with a vast range of other intellectual activities, literary and scientific.

The financial resources with which he was forced to run the theatre of this mini-state, petty as regards size if not cultural ambition, were extremely meagre. While he aimed to create a repertoire there that would have literary integrity, plays had to have sufficient audience-appeal to make this ducal venture commercially viable. Thus, although he harboured serious reservations about the literary quality of Iffland's playwriting, Goethe had begun his managerial career in May 1791 with a production of one of the actor-author's plays: *Die Jäger* (*The Huntsmen*). More to the point here, Goethe also wished to raise the acting standards of his far from first-rate company, and therefore anticipated that an invitation to the great Iffland for a series of guest performances in Weimar would set a level of excellence for his own players to emulate.

Iffland for his part had strong reasons to come. He had been a member of the company of the National Theatre of Mannheim



under the leadership of Baron Heribert von Dalberg since its beginnings in 1779. There he had been associated with the early works of the young resident playwright, Friedrich Schiller, and had created the roles of Franz Moor, the arch-villain of the latter's *Die Räuber* (*The Robbers*) as well as King Philip in *Don Carlos*.

Iffland had been working more conscientiously to perfect the art of acting than was usual among German professionals of the time, and he had intended to stay in Mannheim for the rest of his life. But the war with France, which broke out in 1793 and led to the bombardment of the city, its temporary occupation by the invading army, and the closure of the theatre, made him receptive to the offers he had been getting from other major theatres. Furthermore, since his relationship with von Dalberg had deteriorated as the result of these pressures, he was only too glad to accept the invitation to give a number of guest performances in Weimar – and to look around for other chances for employment. Goethe initiated confidential negotiations with him to join the Weimar company

in case he were to decide to leave Mannheim for good.

Now for the third and most important reason for exhuming the booklet in question – *Entwicklung des Ifflandischen Spiels* | *In vierzehn Darstellungen auf dem Weimarischen Hoftheater im Aprillmonath 1796* (*Iffland's Acting Described* | *in Fourteen Performances at the Weimar Court Theatre in the Month of April 1796*). It is that Böttiger actually performed a challenging task rather well. His scholarly or (if you like) pedantic portrait of the visitor's style, technique, and artistic intentions were so detailed as still to convey a vivid picture of these performances. It is true that the sitter himself was to question it afterwards as not being a wholly accurate portrait – perhaps because of some few critical comments in the general eulogy. The following excerpts from the book, which omit most of Böttiger's self-consciously scholarly apparatus, may enable the reader to decide the value of his comments for him/herself.

Böttiger's Achievement

We must bear in mind that Böttiger (1760–1835) was very much part of the cultural scene in Weimar at the time. He had been what we would now call head-hunted in 1791 to assume the headship of the Weimar *Gymnasium*, or grammar school, on the strength of his reputation as an eminent teacher of the humanities. He quickly established close contacts with the outstanding writers – among them Herder, the elder Wieland, Schiller, and Goethe – who were at the time turning this miniature German Athens into a remarkable focus of intellectual energy.

He joined learned societies, became an expert on classical archaeology, and, last but by no means least, made himself available as a literary consultant to Goethe and Schiller in matters of Greek literature. A busy journalist, writing literally hundreds of essays, he had as one of his outlets the prestigious local magazine, *Journal des Luxus und der Moden* (*Journal of Luxury and Fashion*). No wonder, then, that he readily agreed when Goethe encouraged him to publish an account of the distinguished visitor's performances.

For his stellar appearances, Iffland had chosen a programme designed to exhibit his versatility. The fourteen performances he offered between 28 March and 25 April 1796 contained thirteen plays with only one repeat. Six of these he had written himself – for himself. Disqualified by character and appearance from playing heroic or *jeune premier* roles, he made up for this by his eminent skill as a self-transformer: he maintained that a true actor should be able to play Molière’s Miser one evening and King Lear the next.

Iffland as Gamester – and High Priest

Böttiger, who admired the visitor’s chameleon-like ability totally to change his looks, voice, and deportment, described his appearance in the character of Captain von Posert, the titular ‘hero’ of one of his own plays, *Der Spieler* (*The Gamester*), which was performed on 9 April 1796, in the following terms:

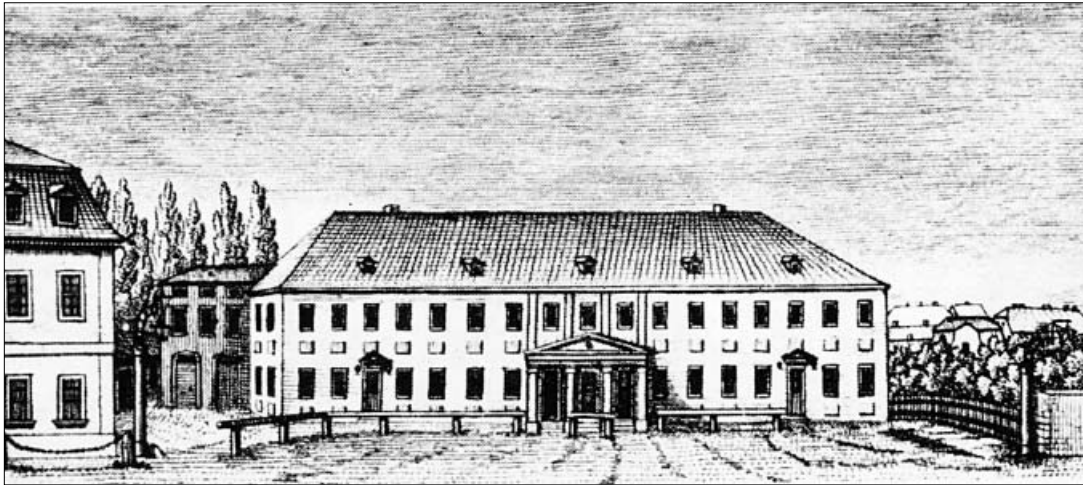
The principal feature of this hardened but by no means satisfied gambler is a mindless lapse into vacuity. The spirit has long since evaporated from this inert lump of flesh. What is left is the gross, sensual, stolid mass. Having made his pile, his chief desire is to go to bed by twelve o’clock. He is no villain who might lay cunning diabolical plots and spin subtle webs with a spider’s art. He is too clumsy and comfort-loving for that. . . . But how is one to lend action and appearance to such a mere nobody? Here is where the master’s art was shown today. He knew how to infuse that dried-up, empty-headed fellow with the leathery forehead, aroused only when a thought about the green baize table flashes through his mind, with just enough spirit as was needed to make him come alive. One did not anticipate this villain might have the strength that he is to reveal in the end. But there is in this very vis inertiae the satanic quality that causes everyone to shudder; . . . from this there develops at last the rogue’s infernal humour, which grabs us by the neck like a dead man’s cold hand and leaves an unconquerable disgust in our souls for longer than is usually the case with the most repulsive stage characters.

The make-up of this demon of gambling was chosen with great intelligence. The scanty hair-

piece, sewn onto flesh-coloured taffeta in such a way as to make the temples rise high up on both sides and thus form a high pallid forehead, whilst hardly any hair stood up at the back, where a shaming bald patch shone through, by itself, served to give the contour of the head, bloated by candle fumes and night vigils, a miserable chunky look which the heavy application of powder only made all the more mask-like. A black patch over the left eye was stuck in the place where the eye itself had been. This monocularity . . . hardly calls for any explanatory comment . . . in a gambler. It uglified him without depriving his muscles of their mobility and made all the more expressive the covetous glance of the exposed eye, when the harpy of greed every now and then showed in its lacklustre dimness. The rest of the thick-set body, the broad-shouldered back, the well stuffed belly, the fat thighs, the fleshy, well padded arms and calves were in the most exact proportion to this thick flat skull.¹

In complete contrast to this low and contemptible character was the noble role of the Peruvian High Priest in August von Kotzebue’s *Die Sonnenjungfrau* (*The Virgin of the Sun*), performed on 14 April. This play, by a dramatist who far outshone Goethe and Schiller on the German stage in terms of his audience-appeal, dealt with a picturesque clash between the Spaniards and Incas at the time of the Conquest. Böttiger relates:

Over the long white priest’s tunic tied with a plain black belt there flowed down a cloak or upper garment, which formed a wide fold from the left shoulder over the chest and almost completely concealed the undergarment from the belt down. The amplitude of this artfully draped cloak rounded off . . . everything sharp, angular, and . . . restless about the extremities. There was nothing hard. Everything heaved and flowed in wavy lines. The material for this . . . was neither taffeta nor satin but a fine woollen fabric, a serge which produces the softest folds, neither bunching too stiffly nor yielding too readily. One part of this upper garment usually rested on his lower right arm so lightly and gently that at times it was held only by its outermost end with the fingers gently bent inwards, but then again was thrown off completely in a passionate gesture, whereby the cloak was



Contemporary engraving of the Weimar theatre (reproduced by courtesy of the Bristol Theatre Collection).

given a more close-fitting, all-encompassing appearance; this produced the most picturesque and expressive effect, especially on the words, 'I wish to cast aside the priest!' since now he really seemed to be standing in his undergarment, stripped of all priestly pomp.

Just as in this instance the effect was brought about by the swift-flowing down of the garment from his hand, so, when the garment was ever so lightly draped over the lower arm and the latter was raised aloft as he was gesticulating, the soft vibrations and folds with which it rose from the ground were a great help in preventing any dry stiffness or monotony in the frequently repeated arm movement. . . .

The man's very walk was expressive, and according to the various scenes in which he appeared, either smoothly gliding, or deliberate and measured, or firm and authoritative. How different was his walk when joining the priests' assembly for the fatal tribunal, or when leaving their circle, incensed at the oppression of mankind!²

A Virtuoso Villain in 'The Robbers'

For the performance of 16 April, Iffland revived the role which, back in 1782, had given him instant fame in Mannheim – that of Franz Moor, the evil brother of the hero of *Die Räuber*. This character, perhaps German drama's most famous villain, demands a virtuoso performance. Böttiger recorded a full range of melodramatic pyrotechnics.

Cowardly guile is the main trait of that monster's character. So his coldness at the beginning fits in very well with all his other pretending, and it would be blameworthy only if the actor had not on several occasions allowed the passion boiling and raging away inside to shine through. But this performance was not at all without these preparatory hints and indeed their most skilful build-up, which meant that they were bound to become more and more frequent and violent with the accelerating progress of the action.

Rather than labour my point, let me only quote here the soliloquy at the beginning of Act II, in which he summons up the inner furies by means of which he intends to torture his father to death. . . . We beheld horror, picturesque and convincing down to the last detail, in the convulsive tremor of his hands and in the backward-leaning posture. He seemed to be sensing the ice-cold embrace of this giant [force] inside him. But how subtly the player's nice judgement knew how to differentiate between the [mere] picturesqueness of facial and gestural miming, which was all we were supposed to take this expression of horror for, and the expression of truly felt horror in one of the final scenes of the play! How frightful and yet how revealing of the villain's unfathomable evil was the insinuating smile with which he called upon those beneficent Graces, the Past and the Future, to be executioners of and helpmates to his plan, and how nicely judged was the hellish exultant cry, 'Triumph! Triumph! The plot is ready!' which was the monster's exit line! Another actor might

have chosen to sound the loudest note in this paeon of triumph. . . . But the scheming treacherous villain never rejoices so noisily and audibly. Even walls have ears. Iffland spoke this conclusion with firm self-confidence but without any screeching hysterics.

I found Iffland's acting just as profoundly conceived and truthful when, during the story which Herrmann in disguise tells old Moor about the death of his beloved son, he, standing behind him, his arm resting on the back of the chair in which his father is sitting, takes keen pleasure, with murderous gestures and a wild glow in his eye, in the grief his vile trick is causing his father and Amalia, and then watches with neck craned forward and eyes bulging in order to detect every trace of searing pain on the face of the all-but-collapsing Amalia.³ The wretch affects to be gentle as a lamb as he reads out the pretended bloody inscription on the sword. But all the more horrifying is the swift, and yet most subtly shaded, transition from the red heat of rage to the pallor of trembling impotence when all his arts concerning Amalia have come to naught and, finding himself alone, he furiously throws the sword on the floor and with a grin that bespeaks hell exclaims, 'All my arts are lost on this stubborn creature!'

With the last two acts, his strength, so far muted and only half used, reached its highest point of tension and activity. . . . Involuntary horror shook the coldest of spectators.

What gradations did not his performance run through, from the first thrills of terror to the most violent emotion and from thence to his being rooted to the spot in the scene when Franz stands facing his brother Karl's portrait in the gallery! What swelling and rising passion from the first tremor when he exclaims, 'Gloating malicious hell!' to the expression of horror when he shrinks back from the phantom of fratricide and, after the most tremendous though quickly overcome shock, stammers out in broken but strident notes his ghastly: 'Hah! Hah! Horror quivers through my limbs!' with staring eyes and limbs paralyzed as if cast in bronze! . . .

The high point or crown of the entire performance, in the soliloquy in which he broods on fratricide, must be . . . his seeing the phantom created by his own disordered imagination. After the ominous pause when shock had congealed all his vital spirits, fear set in. To be sure, Iffland was

not thinking of Engel's description of the frightened man who, with body still turned towards what is frightening him, often takes a few stumbling steps backwards because he wishes to keep the object of terror in view and guard himself from it;⁴ and yet it was precisely this stepping backward with eyes staring fixedly and arms held out before him that gave his gestures the greatest conviction and force. One particular subtlety in this was notable. His right hand is held out further than his left, which is bent backwards more at an acute angle and as it were lying in wait as a succour to the right. All at once he touches his own flank quite by chance with his left hand. This suddenly gives him, as if by an electric shock, the idea of being seized from behind by another horrid apparition. Once more he starts, turns in a flash because he wants to protect himself against the phantom behind him, and – vanishes.

In the scene when he puts the honest old servant Daniel so terribly on the rack with his suspicions, the gesture with which, holding in his hand the plate with the glass of water, he pounces upon the poor wretch, was very well calculated to make a dramatic tableau. But it also made an effective contrast. His pressing up against this same Daniel immediately afterwards, affectionately and caressingly, gave one a creepy feeling. Certainly, the way in which he took hold of his hand to win his trust and the insinuating, sweetly disarming tone in which he put the question to him, 'But surely he put money in your pocket?' were worthy of a Spanish Grand Inquisitor who tortures and impales his victims with honeyed words and dovelike glances.⁵

With equal mastery he played the discussion with Hermann, in which the latter throws off his mask and also tears the disguise off Franz's face.⁶ . . . Iffland's strength . . . in the . . . jeu mixte, in which the actor reveals something to the spectator that his partner on stage must not suspect, was shown most happily here. He scorned the device suggested by the author of flinging himself into an armchair. . . . Even a mere mechanical motion of reaching out for something can disturb the unity of playing at certain moments when everything has to hang together. So Franz already has the pistol in his pocket without first taking it down from the wall as called for by the stage directions. In fact, I consider the lack of movement

in this scene, in which two villains, both the one who does the unmasking and the one who is being unmasked, are viciously fighting at close quarters, far more telling than the wild, furious rushing around the stage as is normally done in the scene. . . .

I have very little to say about the final scene when he suffers desperate pangs of conscience, hemmed in by furies, before being taken away by the robbers. You have to see it and then try to say whether this exemplar of the Last Judgement leaves anyone capable of feeling and analyzing what he has seen. . . . With eyes horridly turned upwards, glowing and glittering at first and then resolved into a petrified stare, with an expansive, then immobile rooted-to-the-spot posture, in which the right hand reaching forward and upward seemed defiant while the left convulsively lowered against his chest seemed protective, he cried out, 'Is there an avenger there beyond the stars?' There follows a pause. – A quiet, frightened, fear-squeezed: 'No!' – Another pause. – The feared thunderbolt fails to come crashing down. – The blasphemer's sacrilegious daring increases. – 'No!' he roars a second time, gratingly, raises his clenched fist heavenwards and audibly stamps his foot. – Now he had slain the One beyond the stars as well. But suddenly all hell seizes hold of him. His hairs bristle, his knees stagger forward brokenly. – A pause of the most deeply felt annihilation! – A flash of lightning streaks across his benighted soul, in which the Universal Judge appears to him with the scales suspended in heaven. – 'But what if it were so after all?' he mutters, the words rattling out from deep within his bosom.⁷

As Goethe's Egmont

For a final example of Iffland's versatility, let us quote Böttiger on the last performance, on 25 April – in Goethe's own play *Egmont* as adapted for the stage by Schiller. Playing the title role, Iffland wisely brought out the more serious aspect of the hero rather than the youthful impetuous lover. (Did he resent Böttiger's having pointed this out, perhaps a shade too bluntly?) In the scene near the end described here, Egmont, imprisoned and shortly before his execution, has a vision of Liberty in the guise of his love Klärchen.



Iffland in the role of Wallenstein, at the Royal National Theatre in Berlin.

The visionary's entire gestural pattern consisted of nothing more than three very simple movements following one another at certain intervals. . . . A slight tremor at the back of the neck

announced the beginning of the imaginary spectacle. The heavenly figure appears. The slumbering lowered head half rises up to tell us that an interesting image is hovering before him. First moment. – After a short pause, during which his head has remained in this half raised viewing position, it rises up wholly into ecstatic contemplation. It tilts back as if looking at the heavens above. The lofty heavenly creature shows him the bundle of arrows and the cap of liberty. Second moment. – The figure floats down closer to him and seems about to crown him with the wreath. It is Klärchen herself in the sweet figure of the Goddess of Liberty. The sleeper's chest rises visibly. He groans and at the same instant folds both his arms as if trying to seize hold of the angel hovering above him. His head had sunk back loosely for a moment, since continued rigidity would have been unnatural; but on stretching out his arms it resumes its ecstatic backward-tilted angle. Third moment. – Martial music approaches. He awakes. But even now he does not leap up abruptly while reaching for the dream vision's wreath on his head, and he observes the greatest decorum in the gradual lowering of his feet.⁸

Iffland's acting made a deep impression not only on the Weimar audiences but also on his fellow actors. Goethe later considered these guest appearances to have been a turning point for the better in the history of the Weimar Court Theatre. But his hopes of committing the distinguished actor to a prolonged stay at what, after all, was a small provincial theatre were doomed to failure. Although Iffland had accepted a permanent engagement in Weimar on 15 April – i.e., during his stay there – he agreed shortly afterwards to an invitation by King Frederick William II of Prussia to take over the direction of the much better endowed National Theatre in Berlin.

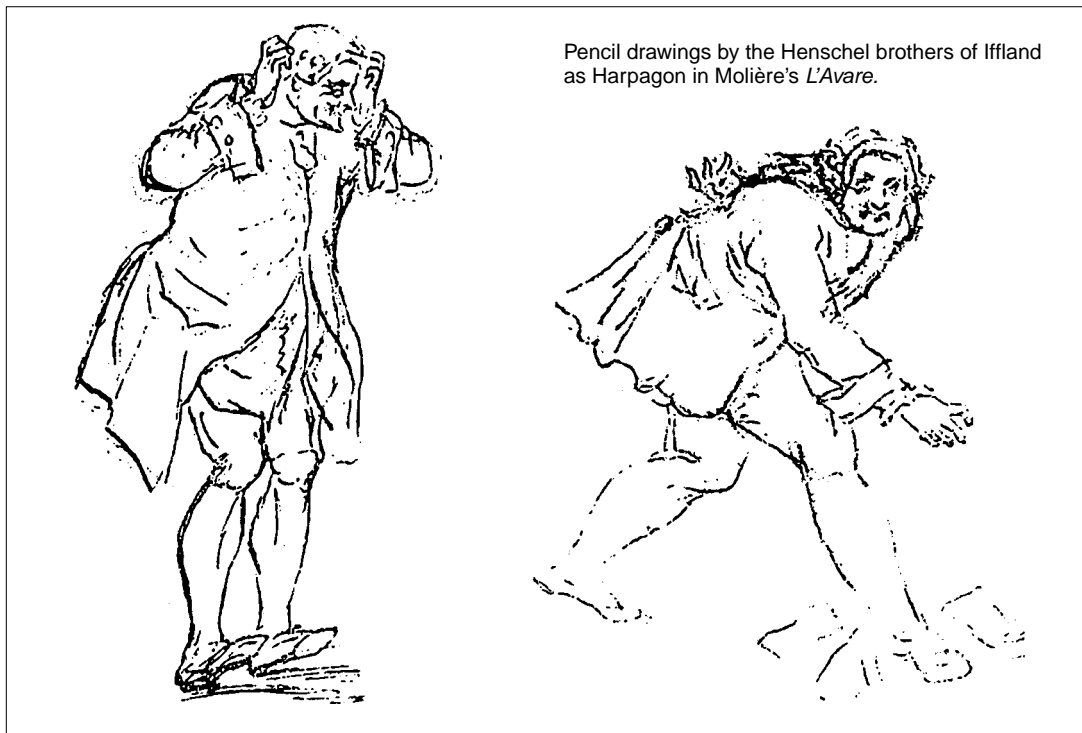
However disappointed, Goethe readily cancelled the earlier commitment and continued to express his admiration for the actor's skill in creating so many different characters with sharply defined, wholly distinct outlines. Indeed, Iffland was to give further guest performances on the Weimar stage in 1798, 1810, and 1812, the latter two visits celebrated by two further publications.⁹

Postscript

It would be pleasant to be able to record that Böttiger's tribute to Iffland's art had had the reception he was clearly hoping for. However, this was not altogether the case. Iffland himself was cool in his assessment, as we have noted. A more negative though essentially light-hearted response came from Ludwig Tieck in Berlin, who combined a dislike of Iffland's acting,¹⁰ which he thought well observed but unpoetic, with an ironic attitude to Böttiger's pedantry. In 1797 the young Romantic author quickly improvised and published a comedy, *Der gestiefelte Kater* (*Puss in Boots*), which parodied different forms of theatre (including *The Magic Flute*) as well as different forms of criticism, from the ignorant to the super-pedantic.

This playlet was experimental in that tumultuous events in the auditorium were almost constantly running in parallel with the familiar tale of the enterprising cat on stage. Among the spectators who pass idiotic comments on the stage action there is one Bötticher, a pedant whose smug utterances irritate the other spectators enough to throw him out of the auditorium halfway through the play. Essentially a closet drama, *Der gestiefelte Kater* did not have much of a stage history in the nineteenth century; but it has risen from the dead in the twentieth century. The German playwright Tankred Dorst made a puppet play of it in 1955; then made a couple of stage versions; and finally turned it into an opera in 1975.

But we have strayed some distance from Böttiger. As a footnote we may add that the busy headmaster's relationship with Goethe, Schiller, and other Weimar luminaries went sour over the years, and he left Weimar in 1806, settling in Dresden for good. His prodigious output of writings, chiefly on classical subjects, which during his lifetime commanded a good deal of respect, is rarely read nowadays. But whatever his personal shortcomings may have been, his detailed description of an outstanding example of late eighteenth-century acting remains an illuminating document. Perhaps it should be translated in full some day – if an interest in



Pencil drawings by the Henschel brothers of Iffland as Harpagon in Molière's *L'Avare*.

continental theatre history were ever to come out of the closet in the English-speaking world.

Notes and References

1. Böttiger, *Entwickelungen*, p. 172–6.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 249–55.
3. In this scene, the villain causes his disguised confederate Hermann to deliver a false message about his brother Karl's alleged death to their father, old Count Moor, and to hand over Karl's sword with a forged inscription in blood which commends Amalia, Karl's beloved, to the care of Franz.
4. The reference here is to Johann Jakob Engel, *Ideen zu einer Mimik* (Berlin: Myliussche Buchhandlung, 1785), Vol. I, p. 166. Engel (1741–1802) was the first important German theorist of acting, whose quasi-scientific doctrine sought to establish an exact equivalence between inner emotional states and their outer expression. The book also attracted attention abroad: Henry Siddons, Sarah Siddons's son, published an English version in 1807.
5. First Franz falsely accuses the faithful old servant Daniel of trying to kill him and then tries to persuade him to commit a murder on his behalf.
6. Hermann, who has served Franz's nefarious purposes in the hope of winning Amalia, finally becomes disillusioned with his promises and turns against his treacherous master.
7. Böttiger, *op. cit.*, p. 299–318.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 371–2.
9. For accounts of two of these later visits, see Schulze and Wieland in the bibliography below.

10. For a brief assessment by Tieck of Iffland's characteristics as an actor, see Brandt, *German and Dutch Theatre, 1600–1848*, p. 149–50.

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