

Curt Goetz

Chronology & Plays



L'atelier Spectaculaire

Curt Goetz's Chronology

Man kann das Leben schwerlich zu leicht nehmen, aber leicht zu schwer.
- Curt Goetz

17.11.1888 Kurt Walter Götz is born in Mainz as the son of the Swiss wine examiner Bernhard Götz, himself son of a physician, and his German wife of Italian and French origins, Selma, born Rocco. He is a distant relative of G. B. Shaw.

1890 Death of his father, the family moves to Halle, where the mother leads a private clinic, hence Götz's early intention to become a physician (as some write) or his mother's wish that he becomes a physician (as others write).

4.11.1894 Valérie von Martens (Edle von Pajér-Mayersberg) is born in Lienz.

Easter 1906 Kurt Götz passes the exams at the City High School in Halle, and plays there Franz Moor in Schiller's *The Robbers*.

1906-1907 Drama training by Emmanuel Reicher in Berlin, Kurt Götz is impressed by Albert Bassermann, who he saw at the Lessing Theatre.

1907-1909 First engagement with Rudolf Schaper at the City Theatre of Rostock where he plays The Ghost in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, further drama training by Fritz Petzold.

1909-1911 Engagement at the Intime Theatre in Nuremberg.

1911-1922 Engagement at the Barnowsky Stages (Kleines Theater unter den Linden, from 1913 Lessing Theatre) in Berlin. He starts with a role in Shaw's *Fanny's First Play*. Then he plays among others: the old Ekdal in Ibsen's *The Wild Duck*, with Albert Bassermann in Ibsen's *Ghosts* and in Shakespeare's *Julius Cesar*, Napoléon in Sardou's *Madame Sans-Gêne*, and several roles in G. B. Shaw's other plays, among others *Pygmalion*.

Kurt Götz changes his name in Curt Goetz and begins to write *Der Lampenschirm* (première on 19.1.1925 at the Kammerspiele in Berlin).

Goetz marries Erna Nitter in 1914.

24.7.1914 Beginning of World War I.

1915-1918 Silent movies, Goetz writes the scripts under several pseudonyms and acts.

1917 Divorce from Erna Nitter.

- 1917-1918 *Nachtbeleuchtung* (première on 2.11.1918 at the Deutsches Künstlertheater in Berlin).
- 11.11.1918 End of World War II.*
- 1919-1920 *Menagerie* (première on 20.2.1920 at the Deutsches Künstlertheater in Berlin).
- 1920 Goetz plays Detective Joe Deeks in a few films.
- 23.12.1920 Scandalous première of Schnitzler's *Hands Around*, where Goetz plays the young man.
- 1920-1921 *Ingeborg* (première on 8.10.1921 for the opening of the Theatre am Kurfürstendam in Berlin).
- April/May 23 Goetz tours in Vienna with *Ingeborg*, Valérie von Martens plays his partner.
- 1923-1924 *Die tote Tante und andere Begebenheiten* (première on 17.4.1924 at the Modernes Theater in Vienna).
- July 1923 Goetz's and von Martens' summer tour with *Ingeborg* in Salzburg and Bad Ischl, engagement in Bad Ischl.
- 20.12.1923 Goetz marries von Martens in Berlin.
- 1925 *Ingeborg* is translated into *Isabel* (première on 13.1.1925 at the Empire Theatre on Broadway).
- 1925-1927 *Hokuspokus* (première on 8.2.1927 at the Kammerspiele in Stettin), Goetz buys a villa in Merligen (Switzerland) as a summer residence.
- 24.1.1926 Selma Götz, Curt's mother, dies.
- 1927 Goetz becomes an independent touring company leader, the manager is his friend and colleague Max Kaufmann.
- 1928-1929 *Der Lügner und die Nonne* (première on 7.12.1929 at the Thalia Theater in Hamburg).
- 29.10.1929 Crash of the Stock Market on Wall Street.*
- 1930-1931 Leadership of the Lustspielhaus at the Friederichstraße.
- 1930-1932 Operetta *Zirkus Aimée*, music by Ralf Benatzky, (première on 5.3.1932 in Stadttheater in Basle).
- 1931-1932 *Dr. med. Hiob Prätorius* (première on 31.12.1932 in Landestheater in Stuttgart).
- 30.1.1933 Adolf Hitler becomes Chancellor of Germany.*

- April 1933 Goetz and von Martens stay in Switzerland, they go to Berlin only to perform.
- 1934-1935 Goetz translates and adapts Jacques Deval's *Towárisch* (première on 4.1.1935 at Komödienhaus am Schiffbauerdamm in Berlin).
- Trip to London with Hatto's translation of *Hokuspokus*.
- Visit at G. B. Shaw's place.
- First publication of his *Collected Works*.
- 1935-1937 Scripts for the films *Glückskinder* and *Sieben Ohrfeigen*.
- February 38 Last performance in Berlin.
- 1938 Film *Napoleon ist an allem schuld*.
- Spring 1939 Move to Hollywood.
- 1939 Script of *The Road to Rome* (for Clark Gable and Greta Garbo but not realized) and of *The Double-Faced Woman* (for Greta Garbo but completely modified).
- 1.9.1939 Beginning of World War II*
- 1939-1945 Goetz refuses to work for the propaganda films and cannot bear the cultureless American production; he runs a chicken farm in California. Goetz translates Noel Coward's *Present Laughter*, *Design for Living* and *Blithe Spirit*.
- Goetz develops *Die tote Tante* into *Das Haus in Montevideo* (première in Spring 1947 in Schauspielhaus in Zurich).
- Goetz translates *Das Haus in Montevideo* into *It's a Gift* with Dorian Otvos (première on 12.3.1945 at the Playhouse Theatre on Broadway).
- New versions of *Hokuspokus* (première in December 1952) and *Dr. med. Hiob Prätorius*.
- Goetz writes the novella *Tatjana*.
- 26.6.1945 United Nations Charter is signed in San Francisco.*
- 2.9.1945 End of World War II.*
- 26.7.1946 The Goetz come back to Europe.
- 31.10.1946 First performance in Europe (new version of *Dr. med. Hiob Prätorius* in Schauspielhaus in Zurich).

Summer 47 Tour in Vienna.

1947-1953 McCarthyism.

10.12.1947 First performance in Germany.

from 1948 *Seifenblasen.*

1950 Film *Frauenarzt Dr. Prätorius.*
Trip to Hollywood.
Move to Schaan (Liechtenstein).

1951 Film *Das Haus in Montevideo.* Goetz writes the novel *Die Tote von Beverly Hills.*

Remake of *Prätorius* film into *People Will Talk* (Director: Joseph L. Mankiewicz, Actors: Cary Grant, Jeanne Crain, Walter Slezak...).

1953 Film *Hokuspokus.*

1954-1955 Goetz adapts Schönthan's farce *Der Raub der Sabinerinnen* (première on 25.10.1955 directed by von Martens).

1956 *Nichts Neues aus Hollywood* (première on 12.10.1956 in Hamburg).

Sept. 1956 Goetz is operated.

1956-1958 *Miniaturen* (première on 13.5.1958 in Akademietheater in Vienna, last performance with Curt Goetz on 17.11.1958 in Renaissance Theater in Berlin).

1959-1960 Script for *Ingeborg.*

First part of his biography *Die Memoiren des Peterhans von Binningen.*

Stays in hospitals, sanatoriums and health resorts.

12.9.1960 Goetz dies at 10 pm in Grabs (Switzerland).

1962 von Martens completes the second part of his biography *Die Verwandlung des Peterhans von Binningen.*

1963 von Martens writes the third part of his biography *Wir wandern, wir wandern.*

May 1983 Goetz's urn is transferred to Berlin.

7.4.1986 von Martens dies in Riehen (Switzerland).

Curt Goetz's Plays¹

1. Der Lampenschirm – Kein Stück in drei Akten (*The Lampshade: No Play in Three Acts, 1911*)

A farce in which the actor Hans Karl and a friend are trying to write a drama that has neither a theme nor a plot consists of a series of loosely connected episodes that take place at Karl's apartment. Karl's condescending treatment of his landlady, an uneducated woman with limited intelligence, reveals that Goetz's seemingly non-political play is, in fact, highly political in that it supports the status quo. Written at a turbulent time in German history when the rigid class system was being challenged, this and Goetz's other plays present it as given and unalterable that there were masters and servants, educated and uneducated people. Goetz often makes fun of the stupidity, vulgarity, and ignorance of the lower classes, thereby appealing to his audience's class consciousness and satisfying its feelings of superiority.

2. Nachtbeleuchtung (*Night Light, 1918*)

It is a collection of five one-act plays that were first performed in Berlin in 1918 and established Goetz's reputation as a master of the one-act genre.

A. Nachtbeleuchtung (*Night Light*)

A capricious director theatre director who is used to giving orders, a painfully shy playwright who tries in vain to be heard, and a cocky actor meet late one night at the actor's apartment to discuss the staging of the playwright's drama. Since the apartment is dark – the power company has turned off the electricity because of long-overdue bills – the three sit in the stairwell of the apartment building. They have to turn on the stairwell light every couple of minutes because it automatically goes off after a certain interval to save energy. The conversation centres on the question whether the actor should present a lengthy monologue on the stage after he has shot himself in the head. As in many of Goetz's plays, the characters' witticisms and wisecracks make them entertaining but psychologically implausible.

B. Lohengrin

Two businessmen have just discovered that their company is facing bankruptcy. While they are deliberating as to what they should do, a stranger appears. He turns out to be a master burglar and embezzler who has come with a rescue plan. After telling the businessmen uncannily accurate details about their business and their private lives, he suggests that they hire him as a cashier. Before the insolvency becomes known, he will disappear with a huge sum of money – a sum that in reality does not exist – so that the insolvency will have a plausible explanation and can be made good by the insurance company. The stranger's impeccable manners stand in comic contrast to his lowly profession. The businessmen are contrasting and exaggerated characters: one is intelligent, worldly, and unscrupulous, while the other is slow, fearful, dull, and awkward.

¹ According to Elfe, Wolfgang D. (1992). *Curt Goetz*. In Dictionary of Literary Biography, Vol. 124: twentieth-century German dramatists, 1919-1992 (pp. 148-156). Detroit: Gale Research.

- C. **Tobby**
 In *Tobby*, a wealthy aristocrat, Harry, learns from his faithful servant Tobby that his wife is having an affair with his friend, who is visiting them. Harry, who remains composed and well-mannered even under the most trying circumstances, actually aids his wife and his friend in their "secret" escape.
- D. **Minna Magdalena**
Minna Magdalena deals with petit bourgeois prejudice, a frequent topic in Goetz's works. Minna Sack, a servant of a professor, is believed to be pregnant. The alarmed professor and his wife arrange for a meeting with the young woman's petit bourgeois father and cautiously try to enlighten him about his daughter's supposed condition. The play, which is full of funny misunderstandings, exposes society's prejudices against unmarried motherhood and suggests what might happen to Minna if she actually were pregnant; but Goetz never allows his audience or readers to get upset or depressed. As is often the case in Goetz's works, comic effects result not only from the situation but from the language: in *Minna Magdalena* there is a comic contrast between the father's simple, earthy, uneducated Saxon dialect and the highly complicated, abstract language of the professor.
- E. **Der fliegende Geheimrat (The Flying Privy Councilor)**
 The main character in *The Flying Privy Councilor* is an arrogant but incompetent physician. One day, Herr Mors – Death – shows up at the doctor's office to fetch him. The physician convinces Death that it would be in the latter's interest to let him continue his bungling medical work on earth.

3. Menagerie – Vier Übungen (Menagerie – Four Exercises, 1920)

Menagerie consists of four one-act plays.

- A. **Der Spatz vom Dach (The Sparrow [Falling] off the Roof)**
 It is a dialogue about divine justice between a prison chaplain and a young man who – as it turns out – has been wrongfully sentenced to two years in jail for seducing a minor. The vain, conceited, self-satisfied, and pompous chaplain proclaims that nothing happens contrary to God's will; that not even a sparrow will fall off the roof without God wanting it that way. The well-mannered, intelligent, and highly articulate young man gives an impressive display of rhetorical fireworks, showing the absurdity of the chaplain's assertions and thereby shaking his smugness.
- B. **Die Taube in der Hand (The Dove in the Hand)**
 The play is about two married couples who are good friends. The wives learn that their husbands had decided by lot which woman each would marry. Intent on finding out who "won" and who "lost", each woman tries to get the truth from the other's husband. In the process, each participant falls in love with the friend's partner. In the end, however, the marriages and the friendships survive.

- C. *Der Hund im Hirn (The Dog on One's Mind)*
The young, vivacious wife of a professor falls in love with another man. The professor devises an elaborate scheme to win back his wife by making her lover confess and, in the process, look ridiculous. As an author who wishes to entertain, Goetz does not question the value system of his time: the professor is successful, articulate, rational, and intellectually superior to his wife; the wife is playful, excitable, flirtatious, and slightly irrational in a charming way.
- D. *Der Hahn im Korb (The Cock of the Walk)*
It takes place in a studio where a film of Hamlet is being produced. All kinds of problems occur during the filming, including that of making a cock crow at the appropriate moment. (Goetz had acted in several movies and had directed one by the time he wrote the play.) Here, as in many of his later plays, Goetz uses German dialects with comic effect: his Hamlet, for example, switches back and forth from lofty Shakespearean speech to a crude Cologne patois.

4. Ingeborg (1921, translated as Isabel, 1925)

The play centres on a love triangle. Two men are in love with *Isabel*: her husband, who is an independently wealthy scholar, and their houseguest, a writer. The question is which of the evenly matched competitors will be the winner, but Goetz purposely leaves the outcome vague. There is little action; it is the elegant, witty conversation, filled with aphorisms, puns, and wisecracks, that is at the heart of the work. One of the many indications of the emphasis on language is that the butler is called Herr Konjunktiv (Mr Subjunctive) because all of his verbs are in the subjunctive mood, making his speech excessively polite.

5. Die tote Tante und andere Begebenheiten (The Dead Aunt and Other Events, 1924)

The Dead Aunt and Other Events consists of three one-act plays.

- A. *Der Mörder: Eine ärgerliche Begebenheit (The Murderer: An Annoying Event)*
One of Goetz's favourite themes, the love triangle, reappears. At an elegant hunting lodge a woman is waiting for her husband and a close friend to return from a hunting trip. More and more circumstantial evidence accumulates that the husband may have killed the friend out of jealousy. At times the play has a nightmarish, surrealist quality; but it ends happily as practically all Goetz's plays do.
- B. *Das Märchen: Eine kitschige Begebenheit (The Fairy Tale: A Tawdry Event)*
An unhappy English lord falls in love with a beautiful young Gipsy and is thus saved from suicide. There is suspense to the very end as to whether the Gipsy has murder or love on her mind when she comes to the lord's castle one night.

C. Die Tote Tante: Eine erbauliche Begebenheit (*The Dead Aunt: An Edifying Event*)

Traugott Nägler's straight-laced, rigid, middle-class moral code is severely tested when he learns that his sister in South America has willed her fortune to his oldest daughter, provided that the daughter becomes the mother of an illegitimate child before her seventeenth birthday. Many years previously Nägler, a schoolteacher who rules his family with strict military discipline, severed all ties to his unmarried sister when she became pregnant. Even though he has denounced her all these years for her moral failure, the thought of getting her wealth is too tempting. In a hilarious scene he suggests to his daughter's uncomprehending boyfriend that it might be all right if they had a baby before their marriage. There is finally a somewhat contrived denouement, and the oldest daughter claims the inheritance. The question as to how a person's moral code stands up to the pressures of temptation could be the subject of a serious drama, but Goetz makes sure that his aim of providing entertainment is not jeopardized.

6. Hokuspokus (*Hocus-pocus*, 1927)

The *New York Times* characterized this play as "without question the most entertaining mystery play that Germany ever turned out." Agda Kjerulf is accused of having murdered her husband, Peer Bille, circus-performer-turned-artist, who has disappeared during a boat trip. The high point of the play is the intellectual and rhetorical brilliance displayed by the prosecutor and the defence attorney, who, on the basis of the same evidence, have come to opposite conclusions. Agda is a woman of such beauty and charm that every man who meets her, including the judge, falls in love with her. In the end Peer reappears, and Agda's legal problems are over. *Hocus-pocus* is amusing and intelligent; as the *New York Times* said, it is "a mystery drama for those who do not like to check their brain in the cloakroom."

7. Der Lügner und die Nonne (*The Liar and the Nun*, 1929)

It begins with a prologue that satirizes trends in the German theatre and lays down Goetz's own artistic goals. In an encounter between a playwright and a clairvoyant, the latter predicts the kind of play the writer is going to write during his vacation in the Swiss mountains. It is going to be about politics and ideology; it will not take place among criminals, nor will it deal with prostitution. Rather, it will be a play about decent people in which no obscene language will be used. The clairvoyant further predicts that it will be an entertaining play. When the ambitious writer indicates that entertainment might not be enough, the clairvoyant replies: "I don't know what you have against an entertaining play! – After the people have been upset all day about politics, economic disasters, dishonesty and unpleasantness, they want to have a good time in the evening". In the play itself, Charly, the illegitimate son of a cardinal, himself becomes the father of an illegitimate child. The mother of the child, a waitress, abandons the baby on the doorstep of a convent, where it is found by Angela, a novice. Angela wants to keep the child; believing that it will be taken from her, she tries to commit suicide by jumping into the river and is saved by Charly. The two fall in love and want to get married. The abbess objects and the case is turned over to the cardinal. The cardinal is a humane and unorthodox clergyman who defends love – physical as well as spiritual – as a gift of God.

8. Dr. med. Hiob Prätorius (Dr Job Praetorius 1932, 1946)

The play consists of seven loosely connected scenes. In scenes 1 to 7, which constitute the frame of the play, Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson are trying to solve the case of Dr Praetorius and his wife, who have died under mysterious circumstances. There is a comic contrast between the brilliant master detective and his much slower friend. Scenes 2 through 6 are flashbacks to the life of Dr Praetorius, a "superman" who can deliver extemporaneous speeches that are intellectual and rhetorical masterpieces; females, including his patients from ages five to seventy-five, fall in love with him; he is an accomplished researcher and a fabulously successful, though unconventional, physician. His success leads to envy and accusations of wrongdoing, and Praetorius has to appear before a Board of Ethics at the university. He is cleared of all charges. That evening, he and his wife die in a car accident on their way to the opera. But even that sad event is portrayed humorously: Praetorius hits a tree because he is laughing so hard about a witty remark of his wife. *Dr Job Praetorius* was written in 1932, the worst year of the Great Depression in Germany, a time of near civil war when democracy was being challenged by extremists of the Left and the Right; but the play is strangely untouched by that turbulence. To the extent that criticism can be heard at all, it is directed in a general and always humorous way against envy, greed, and stupidity.

Theatre plays

- Dr. med. Hiob Prätorius, Facharzt für Chirurgie und Frauenleiden, Eine Geschichte ohne Politik nach alten aber guten Motiven neuerzählt
Première: December 31st, 1932, State Theatre, Stuttgart
Published in Rostock by Hinstorff in 1934
© Dimufidra AG, Stampfenbachstrasse 125, CH-8006 Zurich
- Dr. med. Hiob Prätorius, Facharzt für Chirurgie und Frauenleiden, Eine Geschichte in sieben Kapiteln, Neufassung
Première: October 31st, 1946, Playhouse, Zurich
Published in Berlin by Herbig in 1952
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Films

- Frauenarzt Dr. Prätorius, Director: Curt Goetz,
Lead roles: Curt Goetz and Valérie von Martens
© 1950 Hans Domnick-Film
- People Will Talk, Director: Joseph L. Mankiewicz,
Lead roles: Cary Grant and Jeanne Crain
© 1951 Twentieth Century Fox
- Dr. med. Hiob Prätorius, Director: Kurt Hoffmann,
Lead roles: Heinz Rühmann and Liselotte Pulver
© 1965 Hans Domnick-Film

9. Das Haus in Montevideo or Traugotts Versuchung (*It's a Gift*, 1945)

Goetz worked his one-act play *The Dead Aunt* into the full-length *It's a Gift*.

10. Nichts Neues aus Holywood (*Nothing New from Hollywood*, 1956)

This play is inspired by Goetz's experiences in the American film metropolis. Its main characters are a famous screenwriter and an actress whose passionate love for one another is complicated by jealousy. A birthday party for the screenwriter allows Goetz to present Hollywood society as characterized by shallowness, lack of refinement, greed, crass materialism, egocentricity, a strict hierarchical structure based on income, and brutal business practices. Two European exiles in the play provide a contrast to the Americans. Goetz's intense dislike of Hollywood prevents his play from being as entertaining as most of his other works.

11. Seifenblasen (*Soap Bubbles*)

The three one-act plays of *Soap Bubbles* are framed by a prologue and an epilogue. In the prologue a theatre director (Goetz gives him the name of his former boss, Victor Barnowsky) and a critic are deliberating as to what should be done to avert bankruptcy of the theatre when a man and woman enter the theatre office, identify themselves as an American dramatist and his wife, and force the director and critic at gunpoint to listen to a reading of the man's three one-act plays.

A. Die Barcarole (*The Barcarole*)

The first of the three plays takes place in a theatre on a night that *Hamlet* is being performed. During the intermission an actor is playing the barcarole from Jacques Offenbach's *The Tales of Hoffmann* (1881) on the piano; the other actors believe that something horrible will happen whenever this music is played and tell stories about their experiences. When enough suspense has thus been generated the actors playing Hamlet, the king, and Ophelia perform an impromptu play in rhymed verse dealing with a love triangle. It is obvious that "Hamlet" suspects "Ophelia" of having an affair with the "king" in real life and is terribly jealous. The play combines witty, frivolous playfulness and frightening seriousness, but in the end nothing horrible happens.

B. Ausbruch des Weltfriedens (*Outbreak of World Peace*)

The British prime minister calls the ambassadors of major nations to a meeting at which a Dutch inventor tells them about his new invention: a Good Will Satellite that emits rays that cause humans to be happy, peaceful and good. The diplomats' negative reaction becomes irrelevant when the satellite begins to operate. In no time bureaucratic pettiness, mistrust, and aggressiveness are gone. It is typical of Goetz that he avoids taking sides in the ideological battles of his time.

C. Die Bären Geschichte (*The Bear Story*)

This play is closely related to *Nothing New from Hollywood*. A screenwriter and his actress wife are hosting a birthday party in Hollywood at which the entire film industry appears to be present. The hosts are tired of Hollywood and are planning to retire to their house in the Black Forest; but when one of the movie executives, fascinated by the host's idea for a new film, makes him and his wife a fabulous offer, the couple decides to remain in Hollywood. The play portrays the kind of success that eluded Goetz and his wife during their years in California.

In the epilogue of *Soap Bubbles* the director is delighted with the plays and promises to stage them; the couple reveals that they are actually Germans who pretended to be Americans to further their chances of acceptance. In the 1950s interest in foreign, especially American, literature was strong in Germany as a result of the country's cultural isolation during the National Socialist period.

12. Miniaturen (*Miniatures*, 1958)

Goetz had three one-act plays published and produced under this title.

A. Die Rache (*Revenge*)

In this first play, Goetz combines his favourite topic, the love triangle, with a crime story. A lawyer is threatened by a former lover of his late wife who believes that the woman killed herself because of her supposedly unhappy marriage to the lawyer. The lawyer remains calm, composed, and witty as he enlightens his rival about the true nature of his wife, who had many lovers. The tempestuous and passionate love between the lawyer and his wife is recalled in highly melodramatic fashion.

B. Herbst (*Autumn*)

This play is filled with the melancholy of old age, nostalgia for happier times, and regret about missed opportunities. A slightly senile but charming retired theatre director strikes up a conversation with a lady on a park bench at a spa. He talks of the best time of his life, when he was in love with a beautiful young dancer; he wanted to marry her, but differences in social rank and age caused him to break off the relationship. The lady on the bench is the dancer; she does not tell him who she is because she does not wish to take anything away from his beautiful memories. The nostalgia for the "good old days" of imperial pre-World War I Germany probably appealed to Goetz's audiences in the 1950s.

C. Die Kommode (*The Chest of Drawers*)

It takes place in a small town in Saxony before 1914. The director of the court theatre shows up unexpectedly at the home of one of his employees to tell him that his talented daughter should become an actress. The petit bourgeois family of the employee is flattered and tries to impress the distinguished visitor, but all their attempts to look and act respectable fall apart when an elderly aunt who is living with them dies during the visit and a quarrel ensues among the relatives over who will inherit her chest of drawers. The ending, which is pure farce, serves as humorous counterbalance to the somewhat melancholy endings of the other two plays.