

A film diva on stage. Anna May Wong in *Tschun Tschi* in Vienna (1930)

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In recent years substantial research has been published on Anna May Wong (1905–1961), the first Asian American actress who rose to stardom and gained world fame. While older research focused mainly on her activities in the United States, more recent research has also scrutinized the years she spent in Europe.¹ With almost a dozen monographs² and numerous articles dedicated to her and her work, Anna May Wong is indeed one of the best studied actresses of her generation. Yet, most studies focus on her filmic career and, so far, little attention has been paid to her stage work.³ This is also true with regard to *Tschun Tschi*, Anna May Wong's stage debut in German in August 1930 at the Neue Wiener Schauspielhaus in Vienna. In the existing accounts of her career the play, written for Anna May Wong by a certain William Cliffords, is little more than a footnote, and the little that is mentioned, I'm afraid to say, is not necessarily in line with the actual facts. Based on a thorough survey of contemporary reports and reviews in the local Viennese press, in this paper I will examine the preparation and staging of the play, consider its authorship, and summarize the reception of the play and of Anna May Wong's stage performance.

In the beginning a misunderstanding

The love affair of the Viennese with Anna May Wong began with a misunderstanding. They first took her for a Japanese, which clearly wasn't her fault, but the fault of the film distributor Elite-Film⁴, who decided to release *The Toll of the Sea* (1922) — the first film in which Anna May Wong played the leading role — in Austria as *Cho-Cho-San. Die Geschichte einer Butterfly* (Cho-Cho-San. The Story of a Butterfly). Although director Chester M. Franklin and his script-writer Frances Marion based their film on the *Madame Butterfly* motive, they transferred the story from Japan to China and turned the tragic heroine Cho-Cho-San of the original story into the no less tragic Chinese heroine Lotus Flower. Why the Viennese distributor changed the setting of the film from China to Japan is not clear⁵, maybe it was the popularity of Puccini's opera and the resemblance with Belasco's original story.⁶ That this deliberate choice misled the Viennese audience and the local critics into believing Anna May Wong was Japanese becomes clear from the reports about the film. The fact that the film was in color — it was indeed the first color feature made in Hollywood, and the second feature film utilizing the Technicolor technology after *The Gulf Between* (1917) — triggered quite an

interest and let expectations run high. The apparent obscuring of the film's origin by the distributor, however, led to the false believe not only that the film's story was set in Japan, but that the film itself was a Japanese production. Newspaper ads announced the film as "The newest achievement of cinematography! The first film completely in natural colors! Cho-Cho-San. The Story of a Madame Butterfly. Japanese love drama in five acts featuring the most superb Japanese artists. With Anna May Wong in the lead-role."⁷

The film critic of the Viennese daily *Der Tag* wrote:

The announcements say, that this first Japanese film that we get to see here, is a natural color film. Experts assert that the atmospheric and climatic situation in Japan is beneficial for the use of color-sensitive raw film, and that nowhere else can color-films be made as accomplished as this one. [...] Epic and lyrical is this excellent film, the drama is carried only by Cho-Cho-San, the Japanese actress Anna May Wong. She has no single 'grande scène' in this film, she uses not a single 'scène à faire', although there would have been plenty of opportunities. She is merely happy, simply suffers, and her little poor flimsy soul burns to ashes. How this happens and manifests ranks among the most shattering impressions this film conveys. Her facial expressions and gestures restrict themselves ostensibly to such a narrow confine which we Europeans hardly know. Exactly those facial expressions and gestures that we are familiar with are never played out by Anna May Wong. Almost all of them suddenly are cut short, and in a manner of speaking die a sweet and quiet death, before they ripen. But they speak with such an intuitive and swift intensity that no word can catch up with them. Yes, Anna May Wong is a daughter of that nation whose little dancers dance tragedies without hardly stirring from the spot at all, who dance stories and fairy tales without throwing their arms, raising their legs or twisting their bodies. It is a culture of mime and sign language that is utterly alien to us loud and gesticulating Europeans. But aren't the most wonderful expressions and gestures those that do not align at all to the range of ours and whose substantial wealth we grasp so suddenly and unexpectedly as if a spell has unlocked our so-far bound senses? It is like in a fairy-tale when the hero all of a sudden understands the language of the animals. It is like in the myth when people still understood each other before the Tower of Babel was built.

Wealth of the future? We shall be satisfied with this gain of the present: that the heart of Japan can reveal itself in a Central European movie theater.

But it is only later that we think about this. As long as the delicate body and the sweet face of this tiny Madame Butterfly shines on the screen, we only smile and shed a tear for which we mustn't feel ashamed at all.⁸

Under the headline "Wong film primadonna" the journalist and author Fred Heller in *Die Bühne* raved:

But "Madame Butterfly" is wonderful, *even though* it is a color film, because Anna May

Wong, the Japanese actress, is the miracle of this film. A young Duse of the films speaks to us with a face as touching as the open calyx of a flower, with hands so moving like a child's gestures. Luck, pain, love, worry, pride and humility, longing and renunciation — all of the great and the most secret feelings of the human heart are reflected in these eyes, around this mouth, in the wonderful hands. Not once does affect break out in roaring storms, shy and noble are the looks and gestures of the Japanese woman who is a great artist because she has a very tender, august soul. There is not much to describe in the play of Anna May Wong; she lives, loves, suffers and dies — that is all. The viewer feels the subtlest art with the force of shattering experience. The tiny woman on the screen smiles — and the audience at the press screening all cried. Madame Butterfly's fine wing dust remains from her tragedy. A hint of her flutter. Like a fading song, played on a strange instrument. Anna May Wong from Japan is one of the most valuable instruments of film art.⁹

The critic of the *Arbeiter-Zeitung*, the daily of the Austrian Socialist Party, mistaking the film as a Japanese production, used his review to lash out at the American film industry and was full of praise for the leading lady Anna May Wong:

At the Haydn Cinema, shown to the press these days was the first film, which comes to Europe from the hitherto unknown Japanese film production. In the Far East, too, the resistance against American film makes itself felt; almost all countries that were previously completely dominated by the American film business are trying to replace the imported kitsch with good locally produced films. Because these films have a very strong local flavor, they are not very suited for export. Europe and America work according to a film recipe that seeks understanding from all nations and in all parts of the world; India, China and Japan do not export their films and are focusing on their respective national characters. But precisely because these films are not made according to the international template makes them in exceptional cases so interesting. [...]

Except for the American and his wife, the film is played only by Japanese. The actress in the leading role, Anna May-Wong, is very extraordinary. Her soulful, down to the last detail engaged performance helps over the in places weak psychological motivation of the scenes. Here is a wounded human, bleeding to death from suffering, pure and whole; here pain and joy are brought to their most elementary human formula. This acting performance alone lifts the film above everything that America has sent us over. Human conflicts, real feelings, and instead of stars real, virile, living and experiencing people — with this America cannot compete. It is slowly but surely losing its place. It must finally feel firsthand that you cannot permanently trample all art and culture with kitsch, simply because you have more capital.¹⁰

In Vienna *The Toll of the Sea* aka *Cho-Cho-San*. *Die Geschichte einer Butterfly* opened on August 30, 1926, almost four years after its American release. Six weeks later, on October 15, 1926, Raoul

Walsh's *The Thief of Bagdad* (1924) with female heart throb Douglas Fairbanks in the lead (and as producer) was released in Vienna. The hugely successful *The Thief of Bagdad*, which Fairbanks's biographer Jeffrey Vance regards as "the greatest artistic triumph in Fairbanks' career"¹¹, and in which Anna May Wong was cast in the supporting role of a treacherous Mongol slave, brought Wong to a wider attention and was a stepping stone in her career. Like everywhere else the film was a huge success in Vienna as well and the coverage of the film and its cast corrected the misconception that Anna May Wong was a native of Japan¹² — and established the new misconception that she was a native Chinese. Although Wong herself repeatedly attested that she was born and raised in the United States and (at that point) has never been to China¹³, her Austrian fans by and large perceived her as 'Chinese' rather than 'Chinese American' let alone 'American'.¹⁴

Anna May Wong on stage

Since, despite growing fame and some successes to her credit, the prospect of a solid career in (then still silent) cinema was still uncertain, Anna May Wong turned to the stage to maintain her earnings, to expand her repertoire and to enhance her acting skills. Her first onstage work as a "speaking actress" was in a vaudeville play at the San Francisco Orpheum theater in January 1925.¹⁵ Her act included a Chinese lullaby and a popular song in English. In an interview with the *San Francisco Chronicle* she proclaimed:

If I go on with the act, and I think now that I shall, I will put in a Nautch dance after the lullaby, and perhaps do some short dramatic recitation. I love dramatic things, and I have picked out several little poems that I should like to do. I do this vaudeville engagement as a step toward real dramatic work. I have always wanted to act in serious plays. I hope I shall have the opportunity some day to do them. In the [film] studio one can act only before the other workers, and can't get the effect. I think I like the stage better.¹⁶

Although her later engagement in *Tschun Tsch* didn't fulfil her wish to act in a serious play, there are — as we shall see in greater detail — parallels to her earliest stage work, that is some Chinese songs, some dances and some short dramatic recitations.

In spring 1925 Wong joined a group of actors on a tour of vaudeville circuits to the Midwest, but when the tour proved to be a failure¹⁷ she returned to Hollywood.

Another opportunity for developing her stage career, this time in a more serious undertaking, presented itself in 1929. Limited by American anti-miscegenation legislation, which more or less prevented Anna May Wong from playing leading roles and having on-screen love relations with non-Asian actors, and frustrated with the stereotypical supporting roles she was offered in Hollywood, Wong in spring 1928 decided to go to Europe, which seemed to offer her better opportunities to develop her career. Her decision was preceded by an offer from the German film director and producer Richard Eichberg to star in five films made for international distribution.¹⁸ After their first joint film *Song/Schmutziges Geld* (1928,

dir. Richard Eichberg) filmed at the Babelsberg Studios in Berlin and coproduced by British International Pictures (B.I.P.), Wong starred in the film *Piccadilly* (1929, dir. Ewald André Dupont), which was filmed at B.I.P.'s Elstree Studios near London. Enamored by a promotion photograph of Wong in *Piccadilly* the British stage impresario Basil Dean, who was preparing a staging of *The Circle of Chalk*, an adaptation of the German play *Der Kreidekreis* (1925) by Klabund based on a 14th century Chinese drama, and who was looking for an actress with an Asian look, offered Wong the female lead opposite Laurence Olivier and the Chinese-Australian actress Rose Quong. The play, which opened on March 14, 1929, at the New Theater in London, received a mixed response.¹⁹ In his autobiography Basil Dean recalled the British stage debut of Anna May Wong as following:

She was certainly lovely to look at and possessed natural grace of movement. The voice was low, not unpleasing ... But oh! That California accent! As thick as the smog that now smothers their cities. Try as she might — and she did try — Anna May couldn't get rid of it. In Berlin they had made no complaint. After all, why should they? She was making a silent film. There was miscalculation on my part, too. I had not realized the strong prejudice, amounting almost to total rejection in some cases of the American accent in English plays at that time, just as the British accent was resented on Broadway. [...]

In the event, Anna May failed to make Chang Hi-Tang comprehensible either to stalls or gallery, save in the ecstatic movements of the Lotus dance, which she did to perfection. This was pure Chinese and the audience recognized its integrity at once.²⁰

Critics objected not only to her thick American accent, but also to her voice projection — her voice apparently didn't carry well in the theater —, and to the rather poor quality of her singing²¹ — objections that, as we shall see, were also raised when she appeared in Vienna in *Tschun Tsch*.

The mixed reception of *The Circle of Chalk* may have been a setback for Anna May Wong's ambitions for a stage career, but this disappointment certainly didn't last long, because her film career took a steep upturn. With *Piccadilly*, and the following films with Richard Eichberg — *Großstadtschmetterling/Pavement Butterfly* (1929) and *Hai-Tang. Der Weg zur Schande/The Flame of Love* (1930) — Anna May Wong not only raised her fame, she achieved genuine film star status. *Hai-Tang* was Wong's first talkie movie — and, as it were, the last film she made in Europe. Like many other films of the early sound film era, it was shot in several language versions with different casts. In all three versions, the German *Hai-Tang. Der Weg zur Schande*, the English *The Flame of Love*, and the French *Hai-Tang*, Anna May appeared in the female lead role opposite changing partners, delivering her lines in German, English and French respectively.²²

In Austria, the film was received controversially. The critic of *Das kleine Blatt*, for instance, denounced Richard Eichberg as “lousy German director” who “abuses the splendid Chinese actress Anna May Wong in this stupid and phony German talkie movie”. He goes on:

And Anna May Wong? Even here she has a few touching moments of silent play, presents a few dance movements with her wonderful smooth body; but then she has to speak German, sing German — for crying out loud! She is also allowed to speak a few Chinese words (with a Chinese actor whose naturalness far surpasses all of the German theater actors in this film), and it becomes evident that she can also do great things in a talkie movie; but certainly not in a through and through pathetic film like this one.²³

Less harsh, but quite astutely with regard to Wong's command of the German language, was the critic of the film magazine *Das Kino-Journal*:

Indeed, talkie film is fraught with surprises. Now it has even persuaded the famous and popular Chinese artist to learn European languages, even the difficult German, to assert her place in the new art that is developing to unimagined perfection. And she fully asserts herself. Because the fact that her speech maintains a foreign [English] accent can only be seen as a merit. An East Asian woman with impeccable [German] pronunciation would seem like a contradiction.²⁴

Anna May Wong's first visit to Vienna

The Viennese premiere of *Hai-Tang. Der Weg zur Schande* on March 19, 1930, nevertheless became a resounding success, not least because Anna May Wong came to Vienna to attend the gala premiere in person. It was Wong's first visit to Vienna and she was given a very warm welcome not only by her Viennese fans, but also by high ranking representatives of the Austrian film industry, which confirms the importance that was given to her visit. The *Österreichische Film-Zeitung*, the official organ of the Austrian film industry, reported about Wong's visit as following:

On the occasion of the Viennese premiere of Sascha's B.I.P. film "Hai Tang" at the Schwedenkino, the leading actress Anna May Wong arrived in Vienna on Wednesday, March 19, 1930. As a greeting, General Manager Mandl of Sascha-Filmindustrie AG, the director of the Apollo [cinema], Mr. Edmund Hamber, the representative of Süd-Film AG, Director Hubrich, and numerous press people gathered at the station to give the interesting, sympathetic artist a very warm welcome. In the afternoon, Sascha gave a press tea in honor of Anna May Wong, which was attended by Section Council Petzl, the President of the Association of Viennese Movie Theaters; Vice President Marschall; Mr. Weiler, President of the Association of Small and Medium-sized Cinemas; Section Council Lansky; and a number of well-known Viennese press people. The premiere of "Hai Tang", about which we will report in detail elsewhere, turned out to be a great success for Anna May Wong, who was vividly celebrated and who at the end thanked the audience with a few words in German.²⁵

The reporter of the *Illustrierte Kronenzeitung* summarized the favorable first impression of the exotic film star:

One is surprised at first: Anna May Wong, who in her films gives the impression of a small person, is actually a tall lady, both in behavior and in stature. Her line is ultra-modern, slim, slimmer, etc. The exotic face is finely drawn, the complexion is by no means “yellow”, but rather matt white; most beautiful are her black, shimmering bluish hair and her exceptionally lively eyes, which — as we know from her films — can say so much. Anna May Wong speaks German. But it is obvious that it gives her trouble, so that she is happy when one of the visitors chats in English with her.²⁶

Arriving with the night train from Berlin at Vienna’s Westbahnhof in the morning, Wong finished a sightseeing tour through the city before attending the mentioned press reception at the prestigious Hotel Imperial in the afternoon.²⁷ In the evening she attended the gala premiere at the Schwedenkino.²⁸ “At the end, as now has become the norm, May Wong showed herself to the enthusiastic spectators. She made a really lovely impression in her Chinese dress and it was delightful to hear her broken German, in which she thanked the audience.”²⁹ The following day, in the afternoon she gave an autograph session for readers of the film magazine *Mein Film* at the Apollo cinema.³⁰

During this brief visit to Vienna to promote her first German talkie film *Hai-Tang* Wong was approached by several theater representatives who sounded out the possibility of having her appear in Vienna on stage. Beside the Neue Wiener Schauspielhaus, where eventually



Figure 1 Press reception during Anna May Wong’s first visit to Vienna in March 1930. *Mein Film*, Nr. 223 (1930), p. 15

Source: ANNO/Österreichische Nationalbibliothek

Wong was to perform in *Tschun Tschü*, the Wiener Kammerspiele theater was interested to sign her up for a theater play as well.³¹ It was also reported that Hubert Marischka, the director of the Theater an der Wien, contemplated to feature Wong in the Viennese premiere of Franz Lehár's operetta *Das Land des Lächelns* (The Land of Smiles).³²

In fact, there already had been plans in Germany to present Anna May Wong in a stage play, but nothing came of it. The Viennese daily *Der Tag*, for instance, reported in early October 1929 from Berlin about plans of Gustav Hartung, the director of the Renaissance-Theater, to feature Wong in Gerhard Menzel's *Fernost* (Far East)³³, a play that had its premiere later the same month in Dresden.

In any case, the negotiations with the Neue Wiener Schauspielhaus developed positively, and in mid-June director Jakob Feldhammer and Anna May Wong reached an agreement that in August she will play the leading role in a new play specifically written for her.³⁴ In early July Feldhammer travelled to London to settle details with British International Pictures which had Wong under contract.³⁵ Under the headline "Anna May Wong comes to Vienna in July" *Der Tag* reported:

As we were informed, the negotiations director Feldhammer is currently conducting in London with regard to Anna May Wong's guest appearance at the Neue Wiener Schauspielhaus are nearing completion. Anna May Wong will likely arrive in Vienna already in the middle of this month to take part in the rehearsals, which are scheduled to last for four weeks. As is already known, she will appear in the American play "The Chinese Dancer" (*Die chinesische Tänzerin*), which was written especially for her and which will be adapted for the German stage by Grünbaum and Jacobson. The main male role will be played by Jakob Feldhammer.

After the performances in Vienna, the Neue Wiener Schauspielhaus plans to take Anna May Wong on a tour through German cities. After her guest appearances in Germany Ms. May Wong will appear in Paris in a French version of the play and in London in an English version. At the same time as the London performances, there are plans for a talkie film version of "The Chinese Dancer" as well.³⁶

On July 15, local papers announced that the play *Tschun Tschü* will have its premiere on August 14 and that the great film star will arrive in Vienna very soon to begin with the rehearsals of the play, which was written for her by a certain William Cliffords.³⁷ By then the title of the play had been changed from *Die chinesische Tänzerin* to *Tschun Tschü*, presumably to enhance the play's "exoticism" and to further highlight the eponymous role of Anna May Wong.

For Jakob Feldhammer the decision to invite Anna May Wong was more an economical than an artistic choice. *Tschun Tschü* was the last production of Feldhammer's first year as director of the Neue Wiener Schauspielhaus, which had opened on November 5, 1929, as straight theater.³⁸ The theater itself was built in 1898 as Kaiserjubiläums-Stadttheater (Kaiser's Jubilee Civic Theater) and was originally run as *Sprechtheater* (straight theater). After going bankrupt in 1903 it was renamed Volksoper and reopened as *Musiktheater* (music

theater). Up until the First World War it attained the position of Vienna's second prestige opera house beside the Imperial Court Opera (later Staatsoper). After many extremely successful years, the Volksoper had to struggle massively with the effects of inflation from 1925 on. After a few short-term shutdowns and various rescue attempts, it was closed in July 1928 and only reopened in November 1929 as Neues Wiener Schauspielhaus. The resumption as *Sprechtheater* and not as *Musiktheater* was not unanimously welcomed, and when the already frail economic situation of the theater worsened due to the repercussions of the Great Depression the Neue Wiener Schauspielhaus was forced to close in July 1931 after only two seasons.

When the Neue Wiener Schauspielhaus started in 1929 Feldhammer shared the directorate with Otto Ludwig Preminger, who later was to rise to international fame as film director in Hollywood. The young Preminger, an apprentice of the great Max Reinhardt, and the older Feldhammer obviously had diverging views about programming and developing the new theater venue, and when the differences became irreconcilable, Preminger in April 1930 announced that he will resign at the end of the theater's first season.³⁹ Whether the plan to invite an exotic film star with little stage credibility and a lack of fluency in German contributed to the "artistic differences" between the two directors, that eventually led to Preminger's resignation, is not exactly clear, but it is conceivable that Preminger was not very content with the idea to stage a superficial musical comedy as vehicle for a popular film actress.⁴⁰

At the end of the season, the newspaper *Der Tag* assessed:

The theater's original aim was to stage good performances only with its own ensemble [...] It turned out, however, that the Viennese audience wanted to see star power and preferred modern comedy and especially *Lustspiele* (comedies) in the theater to relax and unwind from the worries of the day.⁴¹

Feldhammer obviously didn't mind to bow to the tastes of the audience⁴² and it was not surprising that he also tried to capitalize on the popularity of the cinema. The star qualities she had attained with her Hollywood films and even more so with the films she had made in Europe, together with the exoticism of her descent made Anna May Wong the perfect choice. And what would seem more natural to present Anna May Wong in a play about the American film world from where she originated. Which brings us to the play *Tschun Tsch*.

William Cliffords and *Tschun Tsch*

When it was announced that Anna May Wong will give her German stage debut in Vienna in the play *Tschun Tsch* there was already a mystique about the play and its author. Fortunately we have a detailed account of how this play came about. It was published in the *Wiener Sonn- und Montags-Zeitung* and shall be quoted here at full length.

How Tschun Tschi came about

It is in itself no small thing to write a European play for a Chinese [actress]. But hardly a piece has ever been created in such a strange way as “Tschun Tschi”, the play by William Cliffords, in which Anna May Wong will give her debut on the German speaking stage this week. William Cliffords had a carefree childhood in Ohio at his father’s house. But when William was 14, his father died and he was faced with the need to struggle through life on his own. With much effort he found a job that appealed to his thirst for adventure and his imagination. He became a prop assistant at a film company in Los Angeles. Not a great position for sure, but at least quite amusing, because it takes a lot of skill and resourcefulness to get the most fantastic aids and props for individual film scenes from one hour to the next. William settled into his profession and was soon popular and valued throughout the film industry.

In addition to his strenuous work, he even found time to confirm his budding talent as a poet. He wrote down his experiences more for himself and recorded the most interesting adventures of his work in small sketches. One day a reporter saw these notes and found them so interesting that he kept publishing them in a newspaper. William, the prop assistant, became famous in one fell swoop and became the day’s talk of Los Angeles. A publisher soon published William Cliffords’ records as a book and gave them the title “The film from a frog’s perspective”. The book was extremely popular and earned little William, who still retained his post, enough money to be free of all worries and even get a small car. This car is the cause that “Tschun Tschi” was written.

On one of his trips, William crashed into a car that a lady chauffeured. That lady was Anna May Wong. The accident had no bad consequences; Anna May Wong’s car was only slightly damaged. William Cliffords promised to write a tailor-made play as compensation for the then little-known Anna May Wong. Two years passed. Anna May Wong had become a famous film star and was currently in London. There she received a manuscript. It was called “Tschun Tschi” and contained a laconic dedication: “I keep my promise. William Cliffords, prop assistant in Los Angeles”. When the “Neue Wiener Schauspielhaus” negotiated with Anna May Wong about a guest appearance in Vienna a few months ago, the Chinese film star declared that she wanted to appear in Vienna in the play that Cliffords wrote for her, in “Tschun Tschi”. William Cliffords was invited by the Schauspielhaus to attend the premiere of his play in Vienna. The answer came: he was unfortunately tied up with business matters [and cannot come to Vienna]. Of course, where in the world should the film studios in Hollywood find a three-meter long parasol or square glasses with an ebony frame when William Cliffords is not there and cannot find these strange props?⁴³

This article was written by Leo Strauß, the second son of the composer Oscar Straus, who after working as administrative director of the Wiener Kammerspiele in 1929 had become deputy director and dramaturg at the Neue Wiener Schauspielhaus. This account, which Graham Russell Hodges renders in his biography of Anna May Wong⁴⁴, was circulated by other

Viennese newspapers as well⁴⁵, but more for anecdotal amusement, because there was little doubt about the real creators of the play. Here a few excerpts from the newspaper coverage in Vienna:

[Anna May Wong] played in a custom-made “play” by a rather insecure Mr. W. Cliffords, who is said to be a modest prop assistant in the film industry in Los Angeles. The playbill lists the good names Fritz Grünbaum and Leopold Jacobson as the German editors.⁴⁶

Apropos Cliffords: it is an old trick that Viennese authors appear in a shamefully foreign mask. And even older is the idea to tell a fictional, but all the more romantic, life story of the legendary author. Well, the two editors have their reasons for not wanting to be personally accountable for the plot, which after all doesn't want to be more than the frame for a film star.⁴⁷

An alleged Hollywood prop assistant with the name Cliffords is named as the author. This reeks of an ostensible advertisement trick. Fritz Grünbaum and Leopold Jacobson [sic!] are the “editors”. Even if the two really should only be the arrangers, they are responsible for ensuring that “Tschun Tsch”, a mixture of revue, operetta, sound film and farce, seeps away into a yawning emptiness.⁴⁸

Two Viennese authors, Fritz Grünbaum and Leopold Jacobson, who hide under an English pseudonym, wrote a revue-like story with a sentimental touch for Anna May Wong and baptized the whole “Tschun Tsch” (“spring dream”).⁴⁹

Some cleverly invented things, for example the American author W. Clifford [sic!], while Fritz Grünbaum and Leopold Jacobson only claim the honors of the German adaptation. Many words of polished conciseness and dry wit clearly indicate the native [Viennese] authors.⁵⁰

From the above quotes it becomes clear that the local critics didn't fall for the publicity stunt and saw right through the real identity of the Hollywood-prop-assistant-cum-playwright William Cliffords. *Tschun Tsch*, for all we know, was the first and as it seems only collaboration between Fritz Grünbaum and Leopold Jacobson. Grünbaum was one of the most popular Viennese cabaret artists⁵¹, conférencier and Schlager music songwriter, and Jacobson was a renowned playwright as well as journalist and theater critic. Both were also in great demand and highly successful as librettists of operetta and revues. All indications are that they decided on the use of the cover name William Cliffords, a “Hollywood prop assistant by trade”, and to circulate the episode of his alleged acquaintance with Anna May Wong, at an early stage, presumably to evoke an aura of “Hollywood mystique” and to enhance the amalgamation of Anna May Wong's “Hollywood diva” persona with her role in the play, which contains some flirtation with Wong's real film career in Hollywood.

What was the play about? Based on the newspaper reports about *Tschun Tschü* the story went along these lines: The incredibly rich American farmer Syd Fokker falls in love with the blonde movie star Annabell Clyde. The white film diva is unable to play a Chinese girl, so her admirer equips an expedition to China to give her the opportunity to study the country in the Far East on the spot for the grand film she will star in. In China, the Americans discover in a temple the novice Tschun Tschü, who dedicated her life to the deity. The Chinese temple dancer falls in love with the jaunty American millionaire, whose life she has saved from the pursuit of the evil-minded high priest of the temple, but he only woos her in order to make the film diva jealous. The Americans take Tschun Tschü with them to the United States and after numerous romantic adventures the dainty temple dancer takes over the role of the Chinese girl, leads the film to success and becomes the darling of Hollywood. The white man, who Tschun Tschü believes loves her, naturally marries the white woman, and Tschun Tschü is glad that at the end the high priest of the order from where she escaped does not kill her as a punishment, but rather marries her.⁵²

Anna May Wong's second visit to Vienna

Anna May Wong arrived in Vienna on July 11, and, as on her first visit a few months ago, she was welcomed by a devoted crowd of fans at the train station. In an interview with *Neues Wiener Journal* she presented herself as a modern cosmopolitan.

I love the antithesis. If I telegraph from London, for example, that I will arrive in Vienna via Paris, you can be sure that, like today, I will arrive with the Berlin Express. Incidentally, I have to apologize to the ladies and gentlemen who were so gracious to welcome me at the train station for my late arrival. My late arrival was due to the *force majeure* of the train. It sounds like an anecdote, but it is still true when I report that an American, out of a whimsy mood, pulled the emergency line during the journey and stopped the train. This fun costs money and time — just the opposite of the Anglo-Saxon theme. Another antithesis: I speak some languages. I learned my mother tongue Chinese and English in my native Los Angeles. I was taught French in — Berlin, German in — London. [...]

I also have the satisfaction that my German language skills, in which I am supposed to show myself on stage for the first time, have been recognized by a qualified party. From Berlin I visited Hannover, the city in which the best German is spoken, and there the policemen thought that I spoke quite pure German. I would like to take this opportunity to draw a parallel between China and Germany. In my home country there are so many dialects that the inhabitants of the individual provinces cannot understand each other, only the written language is uniform and it seems to be the same with you. The expression is also used here: acting language, which means dialect-free speaking.

The trip to Vienna didn't tire me at all. I will also immediately unpack my suitcases to take in new impressions of the city as soon as possible. The dresses that I can show you here

have all been made from my drawings. Hopefully the Viennese ladies will like the oriental touch that I gave my models from Paris. As you know, I've already had an eventful career. I was a film actress first, then I was one of the first to make a talkie film and most recently I appeared in London at the New Theater as an English stage actress in Klabund's "The Circle of Chalk". So far, critics have always praised me with flattering words. With even more excitement I'm now looking forward to my first attempt at a German spoken play. I will give my debut in "The Chinese Dancer" at the Neue Wiener Schauspielhaus. But I will not appear in front of the audience without thorough preparatory work, which will last for a whole month. If this attempt is successful, I will tour all of Germany with this play.

As far as my private life is concerned, I love sports and play all kinds, especially tennis and "squash" [sic!], a game that I got to know in London. I chauffeur myself and just hope that I drive through the streets of Vienna with due caution. I am also a writer and write my manuscripts alone on my small typewriter. Here I can show you samples of my latest work. It is a spoof on Mary Pickford in which I appear in a blond wig. I still wear braids despite my modern hairstyle. My parents don't want me to completely alienate from our ancient customs. My mother even believes that I shouldn't film at all, because photography takes the soul of man away. But I can't and won't let go of my art.⁵³

Wong immediately began with rehearsals, took German lessons, as well as singing and dancing lessons. Newspapers and journals published photographs from the rehearsals and reported about the progress of the rehearsals. The *Neue Freie Presse*, for instance, published the



Figure 2 Rehearsal of *Tschun Tschü* (from left: Jakob Feldhammer, Anna May Wong, Josef Zechell, Bernd Hofmann). *Die Bühne* Nr. 286 (1930), p. 18
Source: ANNO/Österreichische Nationalbibliothek

following report which gave its readers a hint of what to expect from the film star in the upcoming play.

Anna May Wong rehearses for the first time on a German stage. She comprehends with playful ease, one doesn't need to say much to her, on the contrary, she often has an idea that turns out to be good and useful. Although she has learned German not for very long, she puts manifold emotions in her sentences. Unworldly innocence, devotion and childish naivety resonate in her words. She works tirelessly on herself. Singing lessons, German lessons, dance and stage rehearsals are taken in quick succession without a break. And yet she never shows fatigue. With intense dedication she sits at the director's table, chats with the director and discusses various points of her role that still seem unclear to her. There are only a few. Then she suddenly rises. She takes off her red work jacket and at that moment she stops being the big star. Now she is just Tschun Tschi, a little Chinese temple girl who leads a joyless shadow life away from real life. She vividly demonstrates that initially she doesn't feel this emptiness at all. Naturalness is what makes her play so special, it makes one forget that one is sitting in the theater. If she kneels in the middle of the stage and then slowly rises, under the sound of the piano that accompanies her movements, she can conjure up the image of real holiness. The deep impression is intensified by the dark eyes flashing in religious fire and the effect is increased to the utmost by the snake-like movements of her arms. Now she lifts her eyes up and begins to sing. Only now one has the opportunity to watch her closely. Anna May Wong wears dark pajamas, a real Chinese jacket and colorful embroidered woolen slippers. Her shiny black hair is combed backwards into an impressive knot. The facial expression changes in a matter of seconds. Indifference changes with feverish emotion, serenity with passionate concern. On the stage of the Schauspielhaus there is not the usual mess of rehearsals. Everything takes place in placidity.⁵⁴

The reception of *Tschun Tschi* and Anna May Wong's performance

The opening night of *Tschun Tschi* on August 14, 1930, was by all accounts a huge success, especially for Anna May Wong.

Judging from the final applause, which lasted for almost half an hour, the Austrian premiere of "Tschun-Tschi" was a sensational success.⁵⁵

There were cyclones of applause for the exotic guest that did not want to calm down at all.⁵⁶

The exotic film diva was the subject of a fanatical ovation at the end of the Schauspielhaus premiere.⁵⁷

The house, packed to the very last seat, showered her with so much applause that in the end she said a few words of thanks.⁵⁸

In the end, when the little Chinese spoke a few words to the audience, the cheers didn't want to end.⁵⁹

The premiere was a very huge success, which can only be attributed to Anna May Wong's appearance.⁶⁰

Although reviewers generally agreed that Anna May Wong was the undisputed star of the production and the sole reason for its huge success — “beside Anna May Wong's appearance, almost everything else was meaningless or hardly superior to the usual theater format”, as the critic of the *Reichspost* put it — there were commending words for Wong's partners Ilse Schally (Annabell Clyde), Reinhold Bernt (film director Hopkins), Jakob Feldhammer (Syd Fokker)⁶¹, Annie Horak (Miss Ruby), Karl Kneidinger (director general Crapp), Walter Varndal (Mac Macton), Erik Radolf (Pierre d'Anjou), Alfred Lipschütz (Tschao), and Josef



Figure 3 Press report on premiere of *Tschun Tschi* (Feldhammer/Wong). *Neuigkeits-Welt-Blatt*, 26. 8. 1930, p. 8

Source: ANNO/Österreichische Nationalbibliothek



Figure 4 Scene from *Tschun Tschü* (Wong/Feldhammer). *Die Bühne*, Nr. 287 (1930), p. 11
Source: ANNO/Österreichische Nationalbibliothek



Figure 5 Scene from *Tschun Tschü* (Wong/Feldhammer). *Das interessante Blatt*, 21. 8. 1930, p. 21
Source: ANNO/Österreichische Nationalbibliothek

Zechell (Li Peng)⁶², as well as for stage director Bernd Hofmann, stage designer Otto Niedermoser, costume designer Elly Schild, musical director Frank Fox, and composer John Gardener⁶³.

As unanimous as the press was in its judgement that *Tschun Tschü* was a huge personal success for Anna May Wong, as unanimous was the press in its dismissal of the play by Grünbaum and Jacobson (aka William Cliffords). The play was slammed as “awful kitsch”⁶⁴, “lousy piece of workmanship [...], boring, trivial and meaningless”⁶⁵, “complete and utter bullshit [...] an idiotic revue operetta”⁶⁶, “terrible rubbish [...] that has cracks and holes wherever you look”⁶⁷, “a garish frame of primitive film pictures”⁶⁸ and “yawningly boring [...] out-of-gear mixture of farce, grotesque, dramatized pulp fiction, revue operetta and film”⁶⁹. The *Reichspost* critic sarcastically stated: “I’m not proficient in Chinese, but I’m almost afraid that this mellifluous title [Tschun Tschü] means something like ‘nonsense blooming under the night sky’ or ‘blossoming of kitsch unfolding every evening’.”⁷⁰ And the *Illustrierte Kronen-Zeitung* concluded: “The play itself has more faults than merits and it takes an Anna May Wong to turn this mess of half-assed pieces into a success.”⁷¹

What becomes clear from the above quotations is that *Tschun Tschü* became a success *despite* the fact that the play itself was trivial and shallow, and that all credit of its — financial if not critical — success belonged to Anna May Wong. That doesn’t mean, however, that she

was exempted from criticism. As with her British stage debut in *The Circle of Chalk*, criticism was leveled against her singing and the quality of her German.

In the English literature one often finds praise for Wong's good command of the German language, that she spoke "fluent" German and that her German was "impeccable".⁷² Wong herself seems to have been quite confident, as can be inferred from the interview on the day of her arrival in Vienna quoted above. From the reviews of *Tschun Tschü* one gets a quite different impression.

What was noted by many reviewers was her rather heavy English accent — or better American accent, as we should say, though most Viennese audience members wouldn't have been able to distinguish between British and American accent as the London audience did when she played in *The Circle of Chalk*.

She speaks German, a German with an English accent, but one understands her well and one is gripped and moved by her simple acting.⁷³

She was sincerely cheered by the audience, and even had to thank them at the end [of the play] in her English-accented German, which miraculously emerges from the tender throat with a dark, pleasant sound.⁷⁴

Some reviews suggest that the audience was endeared to the exotic foreign star precisely because of Wong's poor German language skills.

The fact that she speaks poor German, that she sings with a frail voice, makes her appearance even more touching.⁷⁵

She even spoke German, whispered, breathed, chirped, and fluted extraordinarily delightful and very lovely sounds that almost sounded like German. Obviously, she went to great lengths to do so, and it would be as ungrateful as it is ungallant to critically nag in an intended compliment.⁷⁶



Figure 6 Scene from *Tschun Tschü* (Feldhammer/Wong). *Mein Film*, Nr. 243 (1930), p. 14
Source: ANNO/Österreichische Nationalbibliothek

We (and with the critic — for once — the audience too) did find the language of Anna May Wong of peculiar appeal, because it was a lovely smatter, a foreign accentuated language...⁷⁷

Her small, touching voice, which only speaks broken German, complements the effect of her body play, but does not increase it.⁷⁸

The critic of the *Arbeiter-Zeitung* probably best summed up the general perception that Wong's appeal didn't stem from her words, but rather from her "silent acting" :

The tenderness of her voice is touching, the German she speaks gets some charm from the strong English accent, but she doesn't master the word so that she could fill a huge [theater] space with it and sweep away a crowd. Anna May Wong's effect on the stage was based on her silent acting.⁷⁹

This impression is reinforced by other reviews as well:

She may have difficulties mastering the German language, but in this case the word is not the main means of expression.⁸⁰

Since she only speaks imperfectly German, in the play, which was tailored to her beautiful, slim body, [the writers] have left [for her] only remnants of the dialogue, so that she moves about like in a silent film and exerts the charm of her personality.

What becomes clear from the reviews is that Wong's German was far from being "impeccable", but that the audience — and many critics — passed over this shortcoming, presumably also because the dialogues in the play by and large were regarded as negligible, and the authors have made efforts to keep her dialogue simple and short.

We come to like this exotic appearance because it brings us closer to simple humanity. It doesn't matter that her German pronunciation is sometimes incomprehensible, that her singing voice becomes strangely thin, that not every note sounds right. One forgets the critical attitude in becoming familiar with this Chinese girl, who is a lady and child, artist and dilettante, consciously and originally, in short an attractive human child.⁸¹

The above review raised a second concern, that is to say Wong's rather poor singing — a criticism also voiced when she appeared in *The Circle of Chalk*. Some critics put it rather euphemistically when they wrote about "the fragility of her voice"⁸², that "she sang with a very small-sized voice"⁸³ or "with insecure intonation"⁸⁴, others put it more bluntly when they commented on "her discreet singing, or what pretends to be [singing]"⁸⁵, or that "her singing voice [was] oddly thin and not every tone sounded right"⁸⁶.

The undoubtedly harshest review was written by the critic of the *Wiener Zeitung*, which shall be given in full length:

All theater directors complain about the competition that threatens their existence. No wonder that they turn the tables once in a while and therefore try to attract the audience to the theater by having a famous film star appear in a spoken piece. The famous Chinese film actress and dancer May-Wong came to the Neue Wiener Schauspielhaus, where her debut on Thursday took place under all the external signs of a sensational premiere and a sensational victory: storms of applause in the open scene and at the end of the acts, and even a short speech of thanks by the movie-goers' favorite at the end, which formed the signature of the evening. Unfortunately, we cannot share this enthusiasm. It would mean to take the xenophilia, the worship of everything exotic, too far, if you offer ovations to a May-Wong, whose special qualities as a film actress have emerged strongly even in this play for the speaking stage, as an actress and singer, that even a Jeritza, a Manowarda and other first-class artists of world renown hardly experienced in the same place.

The Chinese guest, who in this play has to give a Chinese temple dancer who falls in love with an American millionaire, saves his life from the persecutions of a cruel high priest, but is eventually abandoned by him because he prefers a white film diva, was certainly on the level of her task in the few scenes where she only had to act as a mimic. On the other hand, she failed completely when she opened her mouth and tried to speak German, and even more when she sang. She has no voice, at least none that could assert herself in the vast space of the Neue Wiener Schauspielhaus, she often sings excruciatingly wrong, we almost would like to say she meowed like a child who is put on stage in a singing part, although it is certain that there are hundreds of children in Vienna who could do this better and would cause less torture to the ear than this film star. What's the use of graceful movements, the expressive play of the hands, the lively facial expressions? There is a gap between these advantages of the artist and her complete failure as a speaker and singer, which does not give a pleasant impression of this debut. We grant Director Feldhammer the financial success that the hopefully continuing visits of film enthusiasts will ensure, but we protest in the name of the musical genius loci of his theater in particular against such questionable, artistically worthless experiments, against which this genius loci must shudderingly hide its head. (H.P.)⁸⁷

It must not be forgotten that the stage of the Neue Wiener Schauspielhaus until two years ago was the stage of the Volksoper where the top-ranking opera singers of the day gathered, and the slam of the *Wiener Zeitung* critic was probably less intended as an assault on the foreign guest but rather reflects the critic's frustration with the abasement of the former Volksoper that used to be the leading music theater in Vienna next to the Wiener Staatsoper, but has now degenerated into a stage for a musical travesty around a foreign film star.

Hans Liebstöckl, the critic of the *Wiener Sonn- und Montags-Zeitung*, astutely points out the dilemma of the film star at this particular junction in the development of film:

Inwardly she, who is a very sensitive being, is suffering much more without a doubt. For example, that she can't actually sing and her voice is not trained, but that she still has to sing because now life is a sound film and the whole world not only wants to feel and see, but also wants to hear. With the obligation to sing, which the sound film imposes on the beauties, it is a peculiar matter. One likes to hear Richard Tauber in the sound film as much as Marlene Dietrich, although she only has a deep and rough voice and produces little more than unpolished tones. So now one can be successful as a singer, even without being able to sing, but it seems that in this case the sound film only made a virtue of necessity. Since in the sound film beauty is much more important than skill, and beauty can only occur in extremely rare cases of luck, the singing usually has to be left behind. The indulgence for singing that is practiced in sound film remains true to the film diva in the theater. Anna May Wong's Chinese song, composed by herself, achieved a great and strong success, although she could not sing, but sang nevertheless. She was touching to look at and seemed to fully appreciate the magic of the song, although she had no real way of expressing it [with her voice].⁸⁸

The journalist and author Fred Heller, a dedicated admirer of Anna May Wong, put it this way: "The merciful gods may now only save us from a general invasion of the sound film stars into the theater business."⁸⁹



Figure 7 Promotion photo of Anna May Wong in a costume from *Tschun Tschü*. *Moderne Welt*, Vol. 11, Nr. 26 (1930), p. 7

Source: ANNO/Österreichische Nationalbibliothek

If it wasn't Anna May Wong's (poor) singing and her (limited) German language skills, what exactly was it then that enchanted the Viennese public?

In the first place the audience was delighted by Wong's body, which was described as "marvelously lithesome"⁹⁰ "fairylike slender"⁹¹ "child-like slim"⁹² and "boyishly lean"⁹³, and her smooth and elegant movements. Many reviewers were particularly fascinated with her hands.

Her acting is often of a touching intimacy. The expressiveness of her hands, in particular, is admirable and captivating in its perfection. Anna May Wong puts the soul of a song into the play of her fingers.⁹⁴

Her noble, boyish body is full of blissful strangeness. Each of her movements enchants with a noble, deep naturalness, which is refined by the thousands of years old culture of the Chinese people. The play of her narrow hands alone is a dance of matchless expressiveness, songs bloom on her fingers.⁹⁵

Her wonderfully slim body, which seems to be carved out of darkened ivory, the music of the movements, the soulful play of the slim hands, the eloquent look of the big eyes in the otherwise immovable round doll face — all this is combined into an acting effect of special charm, which is further enhanced by the performance of some Chinese songs and a temple dance.⁹⁶

And her hands. They are like sensitive antennae of a shy heart. And this childlike slim body. Extremely slim, fragile like a porcelain doll, and graceful in its movements like a flower in the wind. It is the exotic charm of her appearance that makes Anna Ma[sic!] Wong a star. She is not an actress at all, neither a good nor a bad one, nor does she even try to present us with a theater-Chinese with uncanny passionate fervor or mysterious signs of pain and a bizarre gesture of readiness to die. The role would give her the opportunity to do all of this. Her affect comes in a very inconspicuous way, in a natural, natural way at that — a quick sparkle in the eyes, a slight flutter in the hands, a half-suppressed sound between twitching lips; such is the whole play of May Wong. And she moves. She moves the viewer like a child who believes that she is not being watched and is playing a self-made comedy with herself.⁹⁷

All of her movements are of floral grace. The contortions of her arms are Indo-Chinese, and it is regrettable that she does not have at least ten arms. [...] the language of her unusually long-fingered hands is versatile eloquence and pure pleasure for the eye. In addition, she wears wonderfully gorgeous dresses that glide smoothly along her boyish, hipless body, and her singing is a melodic stride, her dance noble hieratic rhythm.

Since she comes from the film, she loves to play out some situations more broadly and even employ slow motion.⁹⁸

The last comment is a reminder that Anna May Wong was first and foremost perceived as a film actress and although lately she had started to appear in talkies as well, she was still primarily remembered as a silent movie star where the focus lies on the body and its movement and on silent gestures. Fritz Rosenfeld, the critic of the *Arbeiter-Zeitung*, most aptly summed it up:

In the magically beautiful American fairy tale film “The Thief of Baghdad”, the princess had a Chinese servant, a slim, shy creature, whose movements and body play were of strange charm. This role was very tiny, but it earned its performer world renown and an almost fairytale-like career. Anna May Wong continued to play a few small roles in Hollywood, then she went to Europe, where she appeared in a series of films written especially for her. These films were bad films; but the acting of Anna May Wong made them an experience. They were silent films; the sound film in which the Chinese actress appeared did not increase her fame. [...]

The audience [at the Neue Wiener Schauspielhaus] cheered Anna May Wong. It thanked Anna May Wong for the great achievements — in her past silent films.⁹⁹

The enthusiasm of the Viennese audience continued in the subsequent performances. On September 9, the press reported that the 25th performance of *Tschun Tschü* “took place in a sold-out house. The young Chinese artist received numerous curtain calls”¹⁰⁰ and that it “gave the opportunity to ascertain the undiminished appeal of this play and especially of the Chinese actress Anna May Wong, this lovely embodiment of East Asian charm.”¹⁰¹ The *Illustrierte Kronen-Zeitung* wrote:

At the Schauspielhaus, the Chinese film star Anna May Wong showed herself to the Viennese [audience] for the 25th time in the pretty weak revue-play “Tschun Tschü”. But the occasion is not so important here, the main point is that we can see Anna May Wong playing and dancing on stage and hear her singing and speaking. She does it sometimes in Chinese, sometimes in English, sometimes in German, always in the loveliest way, and of course she was celebrated enthusiastically again, especially when she addressed the audience with a speech of thanks in which, visibly moved, she expressed in simple words her great joy at the success she finds in Vienna.¹⁰²

On September 18, Anna May Wong bid farewell to the Viennese public in the last performance of *Tschun Tschü*. Altogether the play received 36 performances. Attempts by the theater to prolong the run failed, reportedly because of film commitments Wong could not forsake.¹⁰³ The originally envisaged tour through Germany came to nothing, neither did a film version of the play — most likely because the play was considered too weak. Anna May Wong returned to London, but only briefly, because on October 19, 1930, she departed from Europe and returned to the United States.¹⁰⁴

Conclusion

The revue-operetta *Tschun Tsch* was an effort by the Neue Wiener Schauspielhaus to bear up against dropping revenues in economically difficult times by capitalizing on the appeal and glamour of the foreign film star Anna May Wong who at this point in time was on the ascent to international stardom. As much as the theater stage offered new challenges and opportunities for film stars in this uncertain period of transition from silent film to talkies, as much did the cinema enhance the opportunities for stage actors and actresses, in particular those from the musical stage. Anna May Wong was a perfect choice, first because of her recent success in German (pan-European) films, and secondly because of the exoticism of her Chinese ancestry. Most descriptions of Wong's performance in *Tschun Tsch*, of her body and appearance, fell back on prevailing orientalist stereotypes and resorted to a diminutive language. In the press dissenting views were expressed as well, albeit only occasionally, as for instance in the review of the newspaper *Freiheit!*:

Anna May Wong is indeed only Chinese in appearance. How she thinks and feels and how she expresses her thinking and feeling comes from Western culture and is de-asianized. There is nothing left of the garlic smelling atmosphere of China, nothing of the fanatical, insidious seclusion of the East Asians, nothing more of the constant fighting position against the Other. She is open-minded like a flower that sucks the scent from our emotional life, and her Asian-ness is nothing more than a delightfully exotic disguise of a fairy tale.¹⁰⁵

The journalist and author Fred Heller in *Der Wiener Tag* also observed:

Stolen from the [Chinese] temple by an American, she doesn't play the "savage" in the world of modern culture, she doesn't need the native costume at all, even in a boyish sailor suit and in a sophisticated western evening toilet her striking idiosyncrasy charms, because it is not underlined, not presented theatrically. We grow fond of this exotic appearance because it brings us closer to simple humanity.¹⁰⁶

This reverberates Walter Benjamin's fascination with Anna May Wong and the ambiguity between the exoticism and the cosmopolitanism she emanated.¹⁰⁷ Wong herself, as we have seen from the interview with the *Neues Wiener Journal* ("I love the antithesis"), actively nurtured this ambiguity. The reaction of the Viennese audience to Anna May Wong and her performance in *Tschun Tsch* corresponded with the reactions to the films she made in Germany, which Shirley Jennifer Lim has analyzed from the perspective of "Oriental cosmopolitanism". "Oriental cosmopolitanism," Lim writes, "manifested itself in early twentieth-century German culture as refracted through the body of the Asian, in this case, Wong. Oriental cosmopolitanism was a way for Westerners to feel like citizens of the world

through selective adoption of ‘oriental’ traits courtesy of consumer culture.”¹⁰⁸ Lim goes on:

Europe in general and Benjamin in particular were interested in Wong as a film star because her body and her career symbolized key aspects of modernity. As the premier film actress of Asian descent, Wong represented multiple facets of racial and gendered difference central to modernity, most importantly the oriental. In the late 1920s Germany used its fantasies of the orient — Turkey, Russia, the Middle East, and East Asia — to work through national and imperial ambitions.¹⁰⁹

That today the play *Tschun Tschü* is completely forgotten and that Anna May Wong’s stage performance in Vienna in 1930 is relegated to the status of a footnote in her career, can be attributed to the apparent weakness of the play, and the fact that it enjoyed only localized success. For this article I restricted myself to a survey of Viennese newspapers and journals, but a more extended study of the play and Wong’s performance, applying the theoretical framework (“performing the modern”) of Shirley Jennifer Lim in her recent study of Anna May Wong, would certainly be a worthwhile task.

Afterthought

It is undeniable that *Tschun Tschü* was a personal triumph for Anna May Wong and it can be assumed that she kept Vienna in good memory. This may have been tarnished a bit, however, when she was bypassed in the casting of the film version of Pearl S. Buck’s *The Good Earth* (1937; dir. Sidney Franklin, Victor Fleming), which came as a big disappointment to her. The anti-miscegenation rules of the Hays Code required that the wife of the male lead Wang Lung, played by Austro-Hungarian-born actor Paul Muni, has to be played by a white actress. The role went to Luise Rainer, the German-born actress, whose career was bolstered in Vienna by Max Reinhardt and Otto Preminger at the Theater an der Josefstadt. Presumably for political reasons, at the start of her Hollywood career MGM proclaimed her to be a “Viennese”, and her emotional performances earned her the nickname “Viennese teardrop”.¹¹⁰ The role of Lotus, for which Anna May Wong was also considered¹¹¹, was eventually played by another, this time genuine Viennese, the actress and dancer Tilly Losch, whom Wong in 1930 had seen perform in London in the musical revue *Wake Up and Dream!*¹¹² In this revue Losch had performed to great acclaim a “Chinese Dance”.¹¹³ We do not know what Anna May Wong thought about it.

Notes

- 1 Shirley Jennifer Lim, *Anna May Wong — Performing the Modern* (Philadelphia/Rome/Tokyo: Temple University Press, 2019); Yumin Li, *Grenzpassagen. Die Schauspielerin Anna May Wong als Grenzgängerin des transnationalen Kinos* (Dissertation, Humboldt Universität Berlin, 2014); Cynthia Walk, “Anna May Wong and Weimar Cinema. Orientalism in Postcolonial Germany”, in: Qinna Shen and Martin Rosenstock (ed.), *Beyond Alterity. German Encounters with Modern East Asia* (New

- York/Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2014), pp. 137–167; Pablo Dominguez Andersen, “‘So Tired of the Parts I Had to Play’. Anna May Wong and German Orientalism in the Weimar Republic”, in: Brian D. Behnken and Simon Wendt (ed.), *Crossing Boundaries. Ethnicity, Race, and National Belonging in a Transnational World* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2013), pp. 261–283; Karen J. Leong, “Anna May Wong and the British Film Industry”, in: *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* Vol. 23, Nr. 1 (2006), pp. 13–22.
- 2 Anthony B. Chan, *Perpetually Cool. The Many Lives of Anna May Wong* (Lanham/Toronto/ Plymouth: Scarecrow Press, 2003); Graham Russell Gao Hodges, *Anna May Wong. From Laundryman’s Daughter to Hollywood Legend* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Mcmillan, 2004); Philip Leibfried and Chei Mi Lane, *Anna May Wong. A Complete Guide to her Film, Stage, Radio and Television Work* (Jefferson/London: McFarland & Company, 2004); Karen J. Leong, *The China Mystique. Pearl S. Buck, Anna May Wong, Mayling Soong and the Transformation of American Orientalism* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005); Derham Groves, *Anna May Wong’s Lucky Shoes. 1939 Australia through the Eyes of an Art Deco Diva* (Ames, IA: Culicidae Press, 2011); Jennifer Warner, *The Tool of the Sea. The Life and Times of Anna May Wong* (Hustonville: Golgotha Press, 2014); Paula Yoo and Lin Wang, *Shining Star — The Anna May Wong Story* (New York: Lee & Low Books, 2016); William Wong Foey, *Anna May Wong. Hollywood Legend* (North Charleston: CreateSpace, 2018); Shirley Jennifer Lim, *Anna May Wong — Performing the Modern* (Philadelphia/Rome/Tokyo: Temple University Press, 2019).
 - 3 One reason, of course, is that her film career is more readily researchable, because the films have survived, whereas her stage works can only be approximated through photographs and written sources such as press reviews.
 - 4 Elite-Film-Verleih was founded by Anton Wulz and Wilhelm Luschinsky in 1926. Luschinsky later founded his own distribution company and in February 1931 distributed Koishi Eiichi’s *Die Flucht nach Yedo* (Kaitō Samimaro, 1928) and Kinugasa Teinosuke’s *Im Schatten des Yoshiwara* (Jūjirō, 1928), which were the first Japanese feature films released in Austria.
 - 5 In other countries the release titles don’t indicate a change of the film’s setting. In France it was released as *Fleur de Lotus* (referring to the heroine’s name Lotus Flower which is also a signifier more associated with China than with Japan), in Denmark as *Det tabte paradis* (The Lost Paradise), in Sweden as *Det stulna paradiset* (The Stolen Paradise), in Spain and Hungary simply as *El tributo del mar* respectively *A tenger vámja*, which are direct translations of the original title *The Toll of the Sea*. In Japan the film was released in April 1924 under the title *Koi no suiren* (Water Lily of Love). (International Movie Database, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0013688/>; accessed 20. 3. 2020).
 - 6 In March 1926 the Japanese soprano Kiwa Teiko had scored a huge success as Madama Butterfly in guest performances at the Volksoper. It was the first time that the popular role was sung by a native Japanese singer in Vienna. The success of the initially planned two performances led the administration of the Volksoper to immediately engage Kiwa for four additional Butterflies as well as an appearance as Mimì in *La Bohème* (cf. *Wiener Morgenzeitung*, 4. 3. 1926, p. 7; *Neues Wiener Journal*, 4. 3. 1926, p. 10). Due to financial problems the Volksoper had to close down in 1928, but reopened the following year as Neues Wiener Schauspielhaus, which in its first season staged *Tschun Tsch* for Anna May Wong.
 - 7 *Grazer Tagblatt*, 16. 12. 1926, p. 16.
 - 8 *Der Tag*, 3. 9. 1926, p. 9.
 - 9 *Die Bühne*, Nr. 97 (1926), p. 35.
 - 10 *Arbeiter-Zeitung*, 5. 9. 1926, p. 21.
 - 11 Jeffrey Vance, *Douglas Fairbanks* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008), p. 153.
 - 12 In Vienna the perception of Wong as Japanese lingered on for some years, although only sporadically (e.g. *Neuigkeits-Welt-Blatt* 17. 3. 1928, p. 12).
 - 13 Cf. *Mein Film*, Nr. 148 (1928), p. 6; *Die Stunde*, 3. 8. 1929, p. 5.
 - 14 This was true with other European audiences as well. *The New York Times* in a review of her first German film *Song/Schmutziges Geld*, for instance, noted that German journalists neglect to mention that Anna May was born in America, preferring to emphasize her Chinese heritage. Wong herself to

- some extent seems to have encouraged the labeling of her as Chinese (cf. Hodges, *From Laundryman's Daughter*, p. 85).
- 15 Chan, *Perpetually Cool*, pp. 38–40.
- 16 *San Francisco Chronicle*, 22. 1. 1925, p. 11, cited in Chan, *Perpetually Cool*, p. 39.
- 17 Anthony Slide, *The Encyclopedia of Vaudeville* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), p.181. The tour actually ended in disaster. The troupe had to perform in empty halls and when the business manager didn't pay the bills and the troupe members were arrested on suspicion of fraud, the group disbanded. cf. Chan, *Perpetually Cool*, pp. 39–41.
- 18 For Eichberg and his efforts to establish a pan-European film network see Chan, *Perpetually Cool*, pp. 46–47.
- 19 For *The Circle of Chalk* and its reception see Leibfried and Lane, *Anna May Wong: A Complete Guide*, pp. 148–150; Chan, *Perpetually Cool*, pp. 55–59.
- 20 Basil Dean, *Seven Ages: Mind's eye, an autobiography 1927–1972* (London: Hutchinson, 1973), pp. 67–68.
- 21 Leibfried and Lane, *Anna May Wong: A Complete Guide*, p. 148.
- 22 In an interview after her arrival in Vienna in July 1930 she stated “I learned my mother tongue Chinese and English in my native Los Angeles. I was taught French in Berlin, German in London.” (*Neues Wiener Journal*, 12. 7. 1930, p. 11).
- 23 *Das kleine Blatt*, 25. 3. 1930, p. 9.
- 24 *Das Kino-Journal*, 22. 3. 1930, p. 10.
- 25 *Österreichische Film-Zeitung*, 22. 3. 1930, p. 14; since the Schwedenkino as well as the Apollo cinema, where *Hai-Tang* was first released, were operated by the municipally owned Kiba (Kinobetriebsanstalt), its representatives were also members of the city administration.
- 26 *Illustrierte Kronenzeitung*, 20. 3. 1930, p. 5.
- 27 *Mein Film* (Nr. 223, p. 15) features a photograph taken on this occasion which shows Anna May Wong encircled by Viennese dignitaries (Figure 1).
- 28 As interlude the Disney Mickey Mouse animation short *The Gallopin' Gaucho* was screened (*Das kleine Blatt*, 15. 3. 1930, p. 9).
- 29 *Der Abend*, 21. 3. 1930, p. 4.
- 30 *Der Tag*, 16. 3. 1930, p. 16; the magazine *Wiener Bilder* (30. 3. 1930, p. 6) published a photograph of Wong signing autographs to fans “taken at Schwedenkino”, but this was possibly a mix-up with the Apollo cinema.
- 31 *Freiheit!*, 5. 4. 1930, p. 6.
- 32 *Freiheit!*, 5. 4. 1930, p. 6; Lehár's *Das Land des Lächelns*, which had a resounding success at its premiere in Berlin in October 1929, was in fact the revision of an older play, *Die gelbe Jacke* (The Yellow Jacket), which was first staged at the Theater an der Wien in February 1923 with Hubert Marischka as Prince Sou Chong. On September 26, 1930, a week after Anna May Wong's last performance as *Tschun Tschü*, Lehár's operetta had its Viennese premiere with Richard Tauber and Vera Schwarz in the leading roles. Prince Sou Chong's sister Mi was played by the German actress and singer Hella Kürty, who clearly copied the style of Anna May Wong with modern short bob and all (cf. *Die Bühne*, Nr. 289, p. 12). This is also evident in Kürty's portrayal of the role in the film adaptation of Lehár's operetta (dir. Max Reichmann), which was shot in Berlin shortly before and which premiered in Vienna on November 8, 1930.
- 33 *Der Tag*, 6. 10. 1929, p. 11.
- 34 *Der Tag*, 22. 6. 1930, p. 15.
- 35 *Der Tag*, 2. 7. 1930, p. 8.
- 36 *Der Tag*, 6. 7. 1930, p. 18.
- 37 *Neues Wiener Journal*, 15. 7. 1930, p. 12; *Der Tag*, 15. 7. 1930, p. 8.
- 38 *Tschun Tschü*, by the way, was the second China-themed play in the first season of the Neue Wiener Schauspielhaus. In May 1930 the theater had staged a production of Sergej Tretyakov's *Brille, China!* (Ryči, Kitaj!/Roar China!), a Soviet play about China's resistance against Western imperialism (cf.

Neues Wiener Journal, 3. 5. 1930, pp. 10–11).

39 Cf. *Neues Wiener Journal*, 11. 4. 1930, p. 11.

40 Although Preminger started his film directing career the following year with *Die große Liebe* (The Great Love, 1931) and eventually became an internationally lauded film director, he was, at least at this point in time, more interested in theater than in film. His biographer Forster Hirsch writes “a wealthy industrialist from Graz, Heinrich Haas [...], approached the rising *homme du théâtre* with an offer to direct a film called *Die grosse* [sic!] *Liebe* (*The Great Love*). Otto felt unprepared. He knew nothing about the technique of filmmaking and, moreover, he didn’t have the same passion for the medium as he had for the theater. The plays of Shakespeare and Shaw meant far more to him than the silent film masterworks made by F. W. Murnau, Ernst Lubitsch, or Fritz Lang in Germany, or by D. W. Griffith in America.” Forster Hirsch, *Otto Preminger: The Man Who Would Be King* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), p. 50.

41 *Der Tag*, 29. 10. 1930, p. 6.

42 In a review about Feldhammer’s first season as director of the Neue Wiener Schauspielhaus, a local newspaper concisely concluded: “Soon the repertoire of the theater showed those symptoms that for the connoisseur clearly revealed [Feldhammer’s] wish: if only, for God’s sake, it is a success — who cares who likes the thing.” (*Neues Wiener Journal*, 19. 7. 1931, p. 5).

43 *Wiener Sonn- und Montags-Zeitung*, 11. 8. 1930, p. 9.

44 Hodges quotes the production notes of the play which most likely were identical with Leo Strauß’s article (Hodges, *From Laundryman’s Daughter*, pp. 47–48; 106).

45 The *Neuigkeits-Welt-Blatt* (26. 8. 1930, p. 8), for instance, retells the story and succinctly adds “Yes, it’s a fairly romantic story. You don’t really know if it’s true, but it’s definitely very nice and very American.”

46 *Neues Wiener Tagblatt*, 16. 8. 1930, p. 7.

47 *Neues Wiener Journal*, 15. 8. 1930, p. 18.

48 *Freiheit!*, 16. 8. 1930, p. 4.

49 *Das Interessante Blatt*, 21. 8. 1930, p. 21.

50 *Der Wiener Tag*, 16. 8. 1930, p. 7.

51 Together with Karl Farkas he perfected the “Doppelconférence”, a popular Viennese cabaret form similar to modern Japanese *manzai*.

52 *Neues Wiener Tagblatt*, 16. 8. 1930, p. 7; *Illustrierte Kronenzeitung*, 16. 8. 1930, p. 10; *Arbeiter-Zeitung*, 16. 8. 1930, p. 9; *Das Interessante Blatt*, 21. 8. 1930, p. 21.

53 *Neues Wiener Journal*, 12. 7. 1930, p. 11.

54 *Neue Freie Presse*, 9. 8. 1930, p. 8.

55 *Reichspost*, 16. 8. 1930, p. 8.

56 *Neues Wiener Tagblatt*, 16. 8. 1930, p. 7.

57 *Wiener Sonn- und Montags-Zeitung*, 18. 8. 1930, p. 4.

58 *Der Tag*, 15. 8. 1930, p. 5.

59 *Das Interessante Blatt*, 21. 8. 1930, p. 21.

60 *Illustrierte Kronen-Zeitung*, 16. 8. 1930, p. 10.

61 Feldhammer, as director of the Neue Wiener Schauspielhaus and as actor very popular with the local audience, had of course home-turf advantage, as is confirmed by a detail reported by *Freiheit!*: “The claque played a major role at the premiere. Director Feldhammer was greeted by it with a storm, which Anna May Wong, the apparently less famous guest [at the theater], was not given. But she was sincerely cheered by the audience [at the end].” (*Freiheit!*, 16. 8. 1930, p. 4).

62 To complete the cast: further supporting roles were played by Hans Fontane (Tao Tai), Kurt Lieck (first sailor), Karl Kalwoda (second sailor), Karl Schreiber (third sailor), Gerta Landers (maid), Fritz Gamberti (innkeeper), Konrad Streda (Tschun Yen) as well as the dancers Landers, Fahringer, Leidenfrost, Lissek, Moeuwe and Gerdahelhi. The dances were choreographed by Karl Schreiber, the film which was used in the play was made by Hans Otto (*Illustrierte Kronenzeitung*, 12. 8. 1930, p. 10).

Among the uncredited cast was the young Jewish dancer Friedrich Berger, a student of modern dancer Gertrude Kraus. Berger later fled Vienna from growing anti-Semitism under the Nazis, first to Switzerland, then Cuba, until he settled in the United States, where upon naturalization in 1949 he changed his name to Fred Berk and worked as choreographer and dance teacher. In his memoirs he writes about his participation in *Tschun Tsch*: "Next I was in a revue, *Quer durch Wien* [Across Vienna], dancing as a member of a football team. Then Anna May Wong came from Hollywood and I found out she was to star in a revue also at the same theatre. Six young men who could sing and dance were needed. I was the only one picked from the revue even though I had never studied singing! We had to sing and do social dancing with Wong. This was my luckiest, happiest year. I was on the stage and nothing could stop me!" (Judith Brin Ingber, "The Vienna Years 1927–1939. Excerpts from a biography of Fred Berk (Fritz Berger of Vienna)", *Dance Research Journal* 13/2, Spring 1981, p. 28). The revue Berger mentions in his recollections, *Quer durch Wien*, had a very successful six-week run at the Neue Wiener Schaufpielhaus prior to *Tschun Tsch*. It continued to be shown there until the end of August in special night performances starting at 11pm after *Tschun Tsch* (cf. *Das kleine Blatt*, 16. 8. 1930, p. 10).

- 63 Like William Cliffords, John Gardener also seems to have been a pseudonym. One critic wrote "John Gardener also feels like an old coffee house acquaintance" (*Reichspost*, 16. 8. 1930, p. 7), another "the already well-known music came from John Gardener" (*Illustrierte Kronenzeitung*, 16. 8. 1930, p. 10). It is possible that John Gardener was a cover name for Frank Fox (Fuchs), who conducted the orchestra of the production, and who was also a prolific and famous film music composer.
- 64 *Neuigkeits-Welt-Blatt*, 26. 8. 1930, p. 8.
- 65 *Freiheit!*, 16. 8. 1930, p. 4.
- 66 *Das kleine Blatt*, 17. 8. 1930, p. 10.
- 67 *Arbeiter-Zeitung*, 16. 8. 1930, p. 9.
- 68 *Der Wiener Tag*, 16. 8. 1930, p. 7.
- 69 *Reichspost*, 16. 8. 1930, p. 7.
- 70 *Reichspost*, 16. 8. 1930, p. 7. These are puns on Anna May Wong's Chinese name Wong Liu Tsong, which the local press used to 'poetically' translate as "mourningly leaning willow near the spring-bushes encompassed streamlet" (e.g. *Neues Wiener Tagblatt*, 16. 8. 1930, p. 7).
- 71 *Illustrierte Kronenzeitung*, 16. 8. 1930, p. 10.
- 72 Jennifer Warner for instance writes "[Wong] traveled to Vienna, Austria to take on the title role in *Tschun Tsch*, an operetta in which she performed in impeccable German." (Warner, *The Tool of the Sea*, p. 43). James Parish and William Leonard also claim "In Vienna, she played the title role in the operetta *Tschun Tsch* in fluent German." (James Parish and William Leonard, "Anna May Wong", in: *Hollywood Players: The Thirties*. (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House Publishers, 1976), p. 534; cf. Chan, *Perpetually Cool*, p. 70. See also chapter 3 ("Speaking German like Nobody's Business" Anna May Wong in Berlin) in Lim, *Performing the Modern*, pp. 27–56.
- 73 *Neuigkeits-Welt-Blatt*, 26. 8. 1930, p. 8.
- 74 *Freiheit!*, 16. 8. 1930, p. 4.
- 75 *Illustrierte Kronenzeitung*, 16. 8. 1930, p. 10.
- 76 *Neues Wiener Tagblatt*, 16. 8. 1930, p. 7.
- 77 *Reichspost*, 24. 9. 1930, p. 10.
- 78 *Das kleine Blatt*, 17. 8. 1930, p. 10.
- 79 *Arbeiter-Zeitung*, 16. 8. 1930, p. 9.
- 80 *Der Morgen*, 18. 8. 1930, p. 9.
- 81 *Der Wiener Tag*, 16. 8. 1930, p. 7.
- 82 *Arbeiter-Zeitung*, 16. 8. 1930, p. 9.
- 83 *Illustrierte Kronen-Zeitung*, 16. 8. 1930, p. 10.
- 84 *Reichspost*, 16. 8. 1930, p. 7.
- 85 *Neues Wiener Tagblatt*, 16. 8. 1930, p. 7.

- 86 *Der Wiener Tag*, 16. 8. 1930, p. 7.
- 87 *Wiener Zeitung*, 17. 8. 1930, p. 7.
- 88 *Wiener Sonn- und Montags-Zeitung*, 18. 8. 1930, p. 4.
- 89 *Der Wiener Tag*, 16. 8. 1930, p. 7.
- 90 *Der Morgen*, 18. 8. 1930, p. 9.
- 91 *Arbeiter-Zeitung*, 16. 8. 1930, p. 9.
- 92 *Der Wiener Tag*, 16.8.1930, p.7.
- 93 *Moderne Welt*, vol. 11, nr. 25 (1930), p. 28.
- 94 *Arbeiter-Zeitung*, 16. 8. 1930, p. 9.
- 95 *Das kleine Blatt*, 17. 8. 1930, p. 10.
- 96 *Der Morgen*, 18. 8. 1930, p. 9.
- 97 *Der Wiener Tag*, 16. 8. 1930, p. 7.
- 98 *Neues Wiener Tagblatt*, 16. 8. 1930, p. 7.
- 99 *Arbeiter-Zeitung*, 16. 8. 1930, p. 9.
- 100 *Neue Freie Presse*, 9. 9. 1930, p. 10.
- 101 *Wiener Zeitung*, 10. 9. 1930, p. 6.
- 102 *Illustrierte Kronen-Zeitung*, 9. 9. 1930, p. 10.
- 103 *Wiener Zeitung*, 18. 9. 1930, p. 5. Hodges suggests that Wong got tired of the effort (Hodges, *From Laundryman's Daughter*, p. 108).
- 104 Hodges, *From Laundryman's Daughter*, p. 108.
- 105 *Freiheit!*, 16. 8. 1930, p. 4.
- 106 *Der Wiener Tag*, 16. 8. 1930, p. 7.
- 107 Walter Benjamin, too, was fascinated by the discrepancy of Wong's "modern cosmopolitanism" and "traditional Chinese-ness". Walter Benjamin, "Gespräch mit Anne [sic] May Wong", *Gesammelte Schriften IV 1/2*, (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972), pp. 523–527. For a detailed discussion of Benjamin's text on Anna May Wong see Lim, *Performing the Modern*, pp. 27–50.
- 108 Lim, *Performing the Modern*, p. 51.
- 109 Lim, *Performing the Modern*, p. 29. This of course also applies to Austria. It should be called to mind that until the end of the First World War the Austro-Hungarian Empire had a small colony in China. After participating in the suppression of the Boxer Rebellion, between 1901 and 1917 Austria-Hungary owned a 60 hectare large concession area in the Chinese city of Tientsin (today's Tianjin).
- 110 Cf. Ralf Oldenburg, *Luise Rainer. Looking back. Der Blick zurück* (Felsberg: Region Verlag, 2019), p. 87. For the role of O-Lan Rainer won her second Academy Award as best actress.
- 111 According to Hodges it is difficult to determine whether Wong refused to play the supporting role of Lotus or whether she was rejected by the studio (Hodges, *From Laundryman's Daughter*, p. 154).
- 112 Hodges, *From Laundryman's Daughter*, p. 81.
- 113 *Die Bühne*, Nr. 255 (1929), p. 23.

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