

FELIX MITTERER:
HUMANIZING THE *VOLKSSTÜCK*

FELIX MITTERER'S
BESUCHSZEIT AND SIBIRIEN:
HUMANIZING THE SOCIALLY CRITICAL *VOLKSSTÜCK*

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TITLE: Felix Mitterer's Besuchszeit and Sibirien: Humanizing the Socially Critical *Volksstück*

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ABSTRACT

Felix Mitterer is a well-known Austrian playwright who has yet to receive extensive recognition in North America. He writes in the tradition of the *Volksstück*, a genre which is usually associated with clichés, crude comedy, sentimentality and entertainment for the masses. But increasingly, authors have manipulated the traditional aspects of this genre to create *Volksstücke* with a socially critical message. Mitterer has been associated with a movement begun in the late sixties known as the "new socially critical *Volksstück*." Most writers of this movement address provocative themes, but have alienated the intended audience of the *Volksstück*, the ordinary people, by creating works which are cynical, surreal or violent. Mitterer has modified the socially critical *Volksstück* so that it appeals to a wide audience.

I will analyze how Mitterer has accomplished this by examining his two most popular and widely performed plays, Besuchszeit and Sibirien. I will explore his presentation of provocative themes — alienation resulting from a lack of communication, the problematic nature of traditional gender roles, difficulties arising from unrestrained progress, and the dehumanizing nature of institutions — and his manipulation of traditional *Volksstück* elements in order to demonstrate his unique combination of the mundane and the artistic. Then I will examine the critical response to performances of

these two works in Austria, Germany and Switzerland, focusing on newspaper reviews, the major source of information on his works, in order to understand the strengths and weaknesses of his method of presentation. I will conclude by showing how he has modified both the traditional and the new socially critical *Volksstück* to create a more human version of this which appeals to a wide audience while achieving critical and scholarly recognition.

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I. FELIX MITTERER AND THE *VOLKSSTÜCK* AUDIENCE

A) Felix Mitterer: His Life, Works and Concerns

Whenever I mention that I am writing about Felix Mitterer, I am met with a polite smile and the expectation that I will elaborate. Although Mitterer is well-known in Austria and has been widely translated, he has yet to receive extensive recognition in North America. I became aware of him during an undergraduate course in Austrian drama. My professor had become acquainted with Mitterer's works while attending a conference in California. She introduced us to Besuchszeit, a series of four one-act plays focusing on the interaction between inmates of, and visitors to, various institutions. Society's forgotten people stared forth from these pages — the elderly, the insane, the imprisoned — and their plights were shown in a sympathetic fashion. More impressively, the visitors, who would normally be considered the "villains" in these circumstances, were also presented with understanding. Here was a playwright with insight into the true nature of everyday human-existence.

The impression left by these plays lingered, inspiring me when it came time to decide upon a thesis topic. But convincing others of the merits of a virtually unknown author would prove more difficult, especially as Mitterer is associated with the *Volksstück*, a tradition perceived to be riddled with clichés and sentimentality. Although

the *Volksstück* has become a more critical literary genre over the last two decades and has been greeted with enthusiasm in certain quarters of the academic world, plays in this category are often regarded with scepticism. So here is an interesting author whose powerful works are associated with a problematic genre. But before I further discuss Mitterer's works and the complexities of the *Volksstück*, it is important that we understand the author himself.

Felix Mitterer is an interesting individual. Born in 1948 and raised in rural Tyrol, he holds no illusions about the "idyllic" nature of living in the country. The details of his early life read like a soap opera. His mother, Adelheid Markssteiner, was a fun-loving farm labourer whose first husband died in World War II. She then had several affairs, one of which resulted in the birth of Felix and his twin sister, who died soon after. Even though his father's identity was in doubt, one man chose to pay alimony for several years despite Adelheid's not marrying him. Having a number of children, Adelheid gave Felix to her friend Juliane Mitterer, who was unable to conceive. Juliane and her husband, Michael, served as foster parents for a time, and eventually adopted him.¹

Mitterer had little comfort in his early years. He worked hard beside his adoptive parents as a farm labourer and was physically and verbally abused by Juliane. Reading became a form of escape, and he was fortunate that his parents, unlike most people in the region, did not feel this diversion was a waste of time and electricity. He became familiar

¹The bibliographic information contained within this and the next few paragraphs is based upon the *Lebenslauf* found on pages 347-365 of Felix Mitterer's Stücke 2.

with popular culture through pulp novels, *Bauernschwänke* (Juliane often played the role of the nagging wife in plays at the local amateur theatre), and the few films he could attend. These inspired him to create his own worlds. Although Mitterer was not an enthusiastic scholar, his stories were noticed and encouraged by his teacher. By the time Mitterer was thirteen, he had decided to become a writer. However, "cooler heads" prevailed and he was sent to Innsbruck to become a teacher.

Mitterer was ecstatic at having escaped from the countryside but he was not eager to study. He dropped out of school at eighteen, determined to write. To support himself he obtained a job at the Innsbruck customs office. During this time he wrote and starred in a one-act play about Judas which was performed at a local church. But he was not happy with this and ceased writing to focus on reading newspapers and magazines. A growing interest in social politics led him to contemplate his own roots. At this point he returned home and made peace with his adoptive mother, gaining a better understanding of her and coming to terms with the conditions of his childhood. This was an important turning point, enabling him to write about the world he grew up in rather than situations which he only vaguely understood. The resulting works began to be published more regularly. By 1977 he was earning sufficient money to quit his job as a customs agent and write full-time: an unusual achievement for someone of twenty-nine. During that year his first children's book, Superhenne Hanna, was published, his first television film, Schießen was produced by the ORF, and his first *Volksstück*, Kein Platz für Idioten, was performed at the Volksbühne Blaas with Mitterer playing the lead. A year later he met a painter,

Chryseldis, whom he married. They have a daughter, Anna, and are presently living in Ireland.

As alluded to earlier, Mitterer's works are considered part of the *Volksstück* tradition, which will be discussed further in the next section of this chapter. As mentioned above, his first play was Kein Platz für Idioten (1977). It provided a sympathetic portrayal of a "village idiot" rather than the humorous depiction typically associated with the *Volksstück*. Mitterer's second play, Veränderungen (1980), was hurriedly done. He later considered it such "ein miserables Stück" that he forbade any further productions (Mitterer I 58). He gained notoriety for his third play, Stigma (1982), which created a huge scandal because it criticized the narrow-mindedness of Catholic church in its treatment of a girl who received the stigmata of Christ. Mitterer continued to criticize the often intolerant nature of society in other pieces, his primary concern being the plight of marginalized individuals. Other plays with this focus include the following: Besuchszeit (1985), his most popular piece which concentrates on the treatment of institutionalized individuals; Kein schöner Land (1987), which shows how attitudes towards an outstanding citizen changed during World War II when it was discovered that he was Jewish; Sibirien (1989), another extremely popular play which deals with the appalling treatment of a man in an old-age home; Munde (1990), which addresses the problems of a Turkish *Gastarbeiter* and was unique in that it was performed on the mountain peak of that name; and Abraham (1993), which focuses on the plight of a young homosexual

man.² All of these works address provocative topics which cause us to examine aspects of our own lives with a critical eye. Yet these works are unusual for both traditional and contemporary *Volksstücke*. To understand why this is so, it is first necessary to understand the *Volksstück* tradition and the various audiences it has addressed. Only then can we grasp Mitterer's relationship to this genre.

B) The *Volksstück* and Mitterer's Place Within It

The *Volksstück* arose during the eighteenth century and is generally associated with southern Germany and Austria, especially Vienna, although many northern German cities such as Berlin and Frankfurt have their own tradition. Originally, *Volksstücke* were meant to entertain everyone regardless of social standing or education. During the late nineteenth century, however, many theatres became dedicated to the *Volksstück* and competed to obtain the best actors. The resulting increases in ticket prices excluded the poorer viewers, bringing a more middle-class audience into the theatres. The main characters therefore became middle-class, and comic relief was provided by lower-class characters (Schmitz 9-10).

What exactly constitutes a *Volksstück* has been a topic of long debate. The term itself translates as "a play for the folk." *Volk*, however, has had many connotations in

²For a complete chronological list of Mitterer's plays, refer to the Appendix.

Germany, including associations with the proletariat and with Nazi ideals. Howes has also linked the concept of the *Volk* to the power of consumption rather than to social class. These difficulties regarding the meaning of *Volk* make it easier to define the *Volksstück* by considering its associated elements. Broad definitions state that a *Volksstück* is a play written for popular audiences in their local dialect.³ Gero von Wilpert expands upon this, stating that the *Volksstück* uses stories which have a nationalistic tone, are easy to understand, and contain music, singing, dancing, special effects, comedy and sentimentality — "low" elements that comply with public taste.⁴ Yet there is much confusion regarding the exact definition of the term since several types of plays loosely bound by similar features fall under this category. Topics range from the tragic to the comic, from the socially critical to the entertaining. This lack of continuity caused Kegler to refer to the *Volksstück* as a "Stückreihe" rather than a genre (2-3).

Despite this confusion, the traditional *Volksstück* can be divided into two main categories: the *Zauberstück* and the *Lokalstück*. The *Zauberstück* descends from Baroque drama, and follows a mortal who ventures into a magical fairy world portrayed through spectacular effects. The *Zauberstück* is simply meant to entertain and contains drama, comedy, music, singing and dancing. The *Lokalstück* pokes fun at contemporary social

³"*Volksstück*," The Cambridge Guide to World Theatre, 1988 ed. 1050.

⁴Gero von Wilpert, Sachwörterbuch der Literatur (Stuttgart: Kröner, 1989) 1015.

and political issues, including local fashions, fads and individuals.⁵ It is often set in a rural environment but avoids the realities of country existence and any criticism of the lower rural class (Kegler 3). Types of plays associated with these two major categories of the *Volksstück* include *Posse*, *Schwank*, *Lokalstück*, *Besserungsstück*, *soziales Drama*, *Heimatliteratur*, *Singspiel* and *Operette*. Plots are simple and contain stereotypical rural characters, including the mayor, the cross wife, the gendarme and the village idiot (Herzmann I 176). A pleasant, nostalgic view of rural life is presented by using crude, slapstick humour and topics with which the audience can easily identify. The conventional *Volksstück*, therefore, follows a formula, a fact which Brecht acknowledges in his "Anmerkungen zum Volksstück" when remarking that "Da gibt es derbe Späße, gemischt mit Rührseligkeiten, da ist hanebüchene Moral und billige Sexualität. Die Bösen werden bestraft und die Guten werden geheiratet, die Fleißigen machen eine Erbschaft und die Faulen haben das Nachsehen" (140). These associations with light-hearted amusement and stereotypical situations have understandably relegated these types of *Volksstücke* to the realms of mediocrity and sentimentality.

It is therefore obvious why few "serious" authors both today and in the past have chosen to label their works as *Volksstücke*: this genre is considered "*Trivialliteratur*" and is not thought to have artistic merit like classical and romantic works. But critics and literary historians have placed many playwrights in this category, including those who

⁵"*Volksstück*," *The Oxford Companion to German Literature*, 1986 ed. 940-941.

have shown that the *Volksstück* can move beyond the realm of pure entertainment when its traditional elements are used in new ways to shake audience expectations (Kegler 4-5). During the nineteenth century, the first socially critical *Volksstücke* emerged, when authors such as Raimund, Nestroy and Anzengruber added elements of tragedy, satire and social criticism to the *Volksstück* to raise it to new heights. This critical quality reemerged during the Weimar Republic, when Odön von Horváth and Marieluise Fleißer wrote *Volksstücke* which made extensive use of social criticism. The *Volksstück* then went into a period of decline when the National Socialists relegated it to *Heimatkunst* and *Blut-und-Boden* literature to promote nationalistic feelings and to convince people of the so-called healthy Teutonic values embodied by rural life (Kegler 7).

Following the Second World War, both critical and traditional versions of the *Volksstück* appeared: there were light, "mindless" plays for those who were not yet prepared to deal with the immediate past, and critical plays, including a resurgence of works by Nestroy, as well as new political pieces like Der Bockerer by Peter Preses and Ulrich Becher (1948). People associated with the latter category tended to have left-wing tendencies, and the Cold War therefore led to a temporary decline in the number of socially critical pieces. As tensions mounted between the West and the Eastern block, Austria — determined to link itself to the West — distanced itself from left-wing associations. That included boycotting social theatre, since addressing political issues of this nature could be interpreted as supporting communism. Reacting to these narrow-minded views, the *Volksstück* began to focus on conservative, non-political

themes, returning to an emphasis on crude humour and clichés. This type of theatre attracted crowds and became known as "Löwinger theatre" after one of the most popular actors in Vienna, Paul Löwinger.⁶

During the late sixties and early seventies playwrights such as Peter Turrini, Wolfgang Bauer, Martin Sperr and Franz Xaver Kroetz reacted against the clichés, lies, and prejudice inherent to the "Löwinger theatre." Looking to Horváth and Fleißer for inspiration, their plays reflected the growing social and political awareness of the late sixties and became known as the "new critical *Volksstück*." These authors modified traditional *Volksstück* elements to criticize society, employing familiar local environments and using dialect to demonstrate communication problems leading to feelings of hopelessness and violence.⁷ Their approaches varied dramatically: Turrini could be cynical and grotesque or realistic but stylized; Bauer's plays contained an underlying note of surrealism or followed a dream-like logic; Sperr concentrated on stark

⁶The above paragraph relies heavily upon the following article: Evelyn Deutsch-Schreiner, "Österreichische Bühnentradiation und modernes Volksstück: Ein theaterwissenschaftlicher Beitrag zu den Voraussetzungen der Volksstückbewegung." Modern Austrian Literature 28.1 (1995): 82-87.

⁷Kormann notes that "Als wichtigstes Kennzeichen des 'neuen kritischen Volksstücks' wird häufig die Sprache angeführt." She cites critics such as Ernst Wendt, who emphasize the "verkorkste[n] oder stilisierte[n] Dialekt" used in these plays, and mentions Anne Betten's exacting study of Bauer's, Kroetz' and Sperr's use of dialogue. Betten concluded that "obwohl die Autoren Sprachrealismus anstreben, sich jeder in anderer Weise der Realität nähert und eine andere Art von Stilisierung wählt." In Eva Kormann, "Das Neue Kritische Volksstück: Ein neuer Blick auf eine nicht mehr ganz neue Dramatik." Das zeitgenössische deutschsprachige Volksstück ed. Hassel and Herzmann (Tübingen: Stauffenburg, 1992) 101.

naturalism and lacked positive characters; and Kroetz' realism highlighted constructed dialogues and an economy of language to demonstrate his characters' inability to express their emotions and ideas. The plays were often violent or shocking, utilizing topics such as masturbation and abortion (Kroetz' Stallerhof), abuse, murder and seduction (Bauer's Magic Afternoon) and cannibalism (Turrini's Sauschlachten).⁸

Although often containing a viable message, the contemporary critical *Volksstück* appears to have alienated its intended audience. Holgar Sandig comments upon this in a paper on critical folk theatre when noting that "[k]ritisches Volkstheater handelt offensichtlich zwar von Volk, aber eben vor jenen Intellektuellen, die sich über die regionale Mentalität erheben. Das sogenannte 'Volk', die 'Masse' bleibt außen vor" (24). Eva Kormann supports this when looking at the tendency of the critical *Volksstück* to use both a stylized dialect and view of reality. She remarks that the genre seeks its public "im sozialen Wohnungsbau" but continues, noting that "Ob sie es gefunden haben, ist eine andere Frage, die im allgemeinen sehr skeptisch beantwortet wird" (105). Herzmann agrees, recognizing that although many writers of this genre have been successful, "the audience who applauded them was not the common man in the street but the academic and the intellectual" (Herzmann II 45). It thus appears that the critical *Volksstück* has

⁸Bernd Fischer, "Peter Turrini." DLB Vol. 124. 399-403; Jürgen Koppensteiner, "Wolfgang Bauer." DLB Vol. 124. 13-24; Reinhard K. Zachau, "Martin Sperr." DLB Vol. 124. 376-379; Calvin N. Jones, "From the Margins toward the Mainstream: Stallerhof and Nicht Fisch nicht Fleisch by Franz Xaver Kroetz." Negation and Utopia: The German Volksstück from Raimund to Kroetz (New York: Lang, 1993) 205-236.

distanced itself from the ordinary people, those who are perhaps in greatest need of its message.

Sandig's, Kormann's and Herzmann's critical insights imply that although the new socially critical *Volksstück* has alienated its intended audience, it has attracted the attention of a more scholarly one. A number of recent conferences on the *Volksstück*, including a symposium in Dublin in 1991, and one in Riverside, California in 1993, have demonstrated this growing interest. Although the majority of the papers were presented on other authors, Mitterer and his works were also addressed at these conferences. In fact, these symposiums have provided the majority of the scholarly material available on him. As Webb notes, Mitterer has received little academic recognition in comparison to his contemporaries, a fact which will be discussed at length in chapter 3. Webb suggests that this is due to Mitterer's ties with the culture and traditions of his native Tyrol, his realistic style which is contrary to current theatre trends, and the naiveté and simplicity of his works (Webb 1-2).

Although Webb and other scholars have linked Mitterer to the new socially critical *Volksstück*, Mitterer claims that he was unaware of this movement when he began writing (Hassel and McMahon 19). This is unexpected because Mitterer uses similar patterns of social criticism to confront intriguing topics, even though his works are not as violent or surrealistic as those of most authors of this movement. But then, Mitterer does not fit the mould of most socially critical authors because he intends to address a more

popular audience with his message. This can be seen in the following excerpt from an interview with him in 1988:

Ich möchte für alle Menschen schreiben. Ich bin kein Prediger, kein Moralist und kein Lehrer, aber ich glaub' schon, daß man mit Literatur etwas machen kann, daß es hin und wieder vorkommt, daß Menschen dadurch verändert werden. Aber ich möchte nicht mit dem Holzhammer arbeiten, sondern möchte den Menschen eine Geschichte erzählen, die sie irgendwie berührt und vielleicht zum Nachdenken anregt. (Hassel and McMahan 24)

Although modest in tone, this statement summarizes Mitterer's intentions when writing: he believes in writing for *everyone*, not just intellectuals. Because of his targeted audience, Mitterer feels that his works must be performed in the *Volkstheater*, not just on larger stages because "es kommen die Intellektuellen, und es kommen auch die Arbeiter, die sonst kaum ins Theater gehen" (Hassel and McMahan 21). He remembers from his own experience as a youth in Innsbruck that he would not visit the "offizielle Landestheater" because it "hatte mit meiner Welt nix zu tun" (Hassel and McMahan 20). Accordingly, he performed his first play, Kein Platz für Idioten, at the Volksbühne Blaas. He looked at what this group was: a dinner theatre performing *Bauernschwänke* and the occasional meaningful play. Recognizing "daß ich an dieser Bühne vielleicht ein Publikum erreichen könnte, das sonst und an einem anderen Theater viel schwerer oder gar nicht zu erreichen ist," he leapt at this opportunity to reach his target audience (Mitterer I 11).

The first performances of this play made quite an impact: the audience, expecting the usual fare of *Bauernschwänke*, laughed as the handicapped youth appeared on the

stage wearing a carnival mask. But Mitterer remarked that "das Lachen verstummte jedesmal bald, und keiner verließ unbeeindruckt die Aufführung" (Mitterer I 11). His satisfaction increased when he contrasted his audience to the students and intellectuals attending the nearby performances of Kroetz' Stallerhof. Although he acknowledged Kroetz' piece as the "größere und auch radikalere Kunstwerk," he felt it had less effect overall since this audience was already inclined towards Kroetz' views. In comparison, Mitterer's viewers consisted of "ganz normale Menschen, mit ganz normalen Vorurteilen," many of whom he was pleased to note, were shaken by his play and began to discuss how the handicapped are hindered by society. It was a small step, but "zumindest ein Beginn" (Mitterer I 11).

The reaction to Kein Platz für Idioten makes it apparent that Mitterer can identify with and reach out to the ordinary people. Although he addresses the *Volk*, he surprisingly does not consider his works to be *Volksstücke*, saying in an interview with Hassel and McMahon that "[ich bezeichne] kein einziges meiner Stücke als Volksstück" (19). The reason for his aversion to this term became apparent in an interview with Christoph Hirschmann. Mitterer criticized the word, stating "ich weiß auch gar nicht, was ein 'Volksstück' ist. Ins Volkstheater gehen die Blöden hin, und ins Burgtheater die G'scheiten? Oder was?"⁹ Yet it was inevitable that his works be linked with this genre since they utilize elements of the traditional *Volksstück* listed earlier, including dialect,

⁹ Christoph Hirschmann, "Schauspiel in 2500 Metern Höhe," Arbeiter Zeitung 3 Aug. 1990.

stock characters, the expectation of a happy ending, humour, and occasionally, music. Herzmann argues that these serve as reference points for more traditionally-minded individuals who might not otherwise go to see his socially critical plays (Herzmann I 177).

Mitterer's refusal to acknowledge that he writes *Volksstücke* adds an unexpected twist to the attempt to evaluate his works. Here is a writer who modifies traditional *Volksstück* elements and addresses critical, provocative themes, both of which are aspects which might seem to place his works in the category of the new socially critical *Volksstück*. But unlike the other writers associated with this movement, he has not alienated the traditional *Volksstück* audience. And although he reaches out to the *Volk*, he does not consider himself a *Volksstück* author. There are many paradoxes here which need to be explored in order to consider if Mitterer has created a new version of the *Volksstück*, and if so, how he has used it to reach his intended audience, which is that of the traditional *Volksstück*. I will do so by addressing his two most popular works, Besuchszeit and Sibirien.

C) My Intent in Examining Besuchszeit and Sibirien

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Brecht remarked on the formulaic nature of the conventional *Volksstück* in his "Anmerkungen zum Volksstück." But Brecht believed that this genre had never been given the opportunity to reach its full potential and

therefore, could be developed more fully. He felt that the solution was to create a form of theatre which was "zugleich artistisch und natürlich" through the use of the *Versstück* (142). Although Brecht's own *Volksstück*, Herr Puntila und sein Knecht Matti, was never recognized as the definitive version of the *Volksstück*, his views on the theatre have influenced critical reaction to this genre. Many critics adhere to Brecht's idea that one must alienate the audience so that they focus on the message rather than identifying emotionally with the situations or people being portrayed. Because Mitterer's approach differs from Brecht's theories, there is some debate about whether his plays are "good" in the context of contemporary theatre.

Personally, I find that Mitterer deserves critical recognition for the manner in which he combines artistic merit and popular theatre traditions to make the *Volksstück* more human. To demonstrate this, I have decided to focus on his two most-performed and celebrated plays, Besuchszeit and Sibirien, which have been translated into several languages and been produced throughout Austria and the world. Their popularity ensures that they are ideal to investigate Mitterer's appeal. Although these plays are well-liked, they are not typical of the traditional *Volksstück* thematically or structurally.

Thematically, they are intriguing because, like the majority of Mitterer's works, they focus on the plight of the marginalized, presenting life in an honest, if not always flattering, manner. Structurally, they differ as well. Besuchszeit consists of four separate stories bound together by the theme of visits to institutionalized family members. It therefore presents a broad spectrum of Mitterer's concerns, including examinations of the plight of

women, the insane, the sick and the elderly. Besuchszeit is also interesting in that each act contains only two characters — the inmate and the visitor. This enables us to concentrate on Mitterer's skill in using dialogue to develop his characters and their situations convincingly in a short space of time. Sibirien, in comparison, is interesting because it is a monologue — a modern dramatic form not associated with the traditional *Volksstück*. Because Sibirien is also based on "Abstellgleis," an act in Besuchszeit, it enables us to see how Mitterer shifts his technique from dialogue to monologue, and the effect this has on the communication of his themes. The limited number of characters in each play also permits greater focus on Mitterer's message, enabling us to gain a better understanding of the underlying strengths of Mitterer's works.

Oddly enough, despite their popularity, Besuchszeit and Sibirien have received scant scholarly attention. Only two papers focus specifically on these plays: Gudron Brokoph-Mauch's "Felix Mitterers Besuchszeit" and Gerd K. Schneider's "Timely Meditations or Not Yet! Social Criticism in Felix Mitterer's Sibirien."¹⁰ Two further papers contain a short discussion of one of the acts in Besuchszeit, "Verbrecherin." These are Helga Schreckenberger's "Violence and Sexual Politics in Felix Mitterer's Plays "Verbrecherin," Heim, and Die Wilde Frau," and Ursula Hassel's "*Ihr Frauen habts es nit leicht*. The Dramatization of Gender Issues In the Plays by Felix Mitterer." These papers

¹⁰An English translation of Brokoph-Mauch's paper is also available under the title "Felix Mitterer's Besuchszeit" in: Nicholas Meyerhofer and Karl Webb, Felix Mitterer: A Critical Introduction (Riverside, CA: Ariadne, 1995) 121-129.

are general in nature and will be discussed more thoroughly in chapter 3. Meanwhile, it suffices to say that the plays require more scholarly analysis, especially with regard to how Mitterer has modified the *Volksstück*.

In chapter 2, I will analyze how Mitterer presents his themes as well as how he uses traditional *Volksstück* elements. Because it is important to be familiar with the plays before starting such a task, I will begin the chapter with a summary of Besuchszeit and Sibirien. I will then focus on the provocative presentation of the social themes in these two pieces: alienation resulting from communication difficulties; gender issues; the problems with unrestrained progress, and the dehumanizing aspects of institutions. Although scholars have often focused on the first two themes in Mitterer's other plays, these issues have only been addressed briefly with regard to Besuchszeit and Sibirien. I will therefore provide a more in-depth discussion of these topics in this context and will examine the two other themes as well, which scholars have left largely unexamined. I will then analyze Mitterer's use of conventional *Volksstück* elements which he alters to emphasize his socially critical message. My goal will be to determine how Mitterer is able to humanize these pieces even though he uses provocative themes like other authors of the new socially critical *Volksstück*.

In chapter 3, I will appraise the strengths and weaknesses of this humanizing effect by examining the reception of Besuchszeit and Sibirien by scholars and the press. I will begin with a brief examination of the scholarly response to these two plays, focusing on the four articles that I mentioned earlier. Because there are so few scholarly articles

available on Besuchszeit and Sibirien, I will expand on the critical response by looking at press reviews of these plays in Austria and abroad. In Austria, I will analyze twenty-two reviews of eleven productions of Besuchszeit and thirty reviews of ten productions of Sibirien. At the international level, I will address five reviews of two productions of Besuchszeit and ten reviews of four productions of Sibirien. As can readily be seen, the main thrust of my study will be the opinions of the Austrian reviewers, some of whom accuse Mitterer of resorting to melodrama and sentimentality. Perhaps this indicates that Brechtian ideas of the theatre and perceptions of the *Volksstück* as *Trivalliteratur* have tainted critical reaction towards these plays. But others are enthusiastic about the powerful issues which Mitterer addresses, the humanity of his characters, his honesty, the uncomplicated nature of his language and the immediacy of his works. I will suggest possible reasons for these mixed responses, and discuss whether some of the more negative comments have had as negative an effect on the popularity of Besuchszeit and Sibirien as some critics would have us believe. These opinions regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the plays will aid my investigation of what Mitterer has contributed to the *Volksstück*.

In the final chapter, I will pull together the information I have collected in an attempt to solve some of the inherent paradoxes discussed at the end of the previous section. I will begin by stating my conclusions on how Mitterer has changed the *Volksstück* through his use of provocative topics and traditional *Volksstück* elements in Besuchszeit and Sibirien. Next, I will summarize the scholarly reactions and the views of

the press to establish the strengths and weaknesses of Mitterer's works and how these contribute to his appeal. I will then discuss how Mitterer has created his own category of *Volksstück* in contrast to more Brechtian traditions, by balancing tradition and innovation in such a manner as to return this genre to more humane ideals. He demonstrates that it is possible to create a popular, yet powerful piece of theatre using realism and emotional identification — factors which are often unpopular in contemporary theatre.

II. MITTERER'S USE OF SOCIALLY CRITICAL THEMES AND TRADITIONAL *VOLKSSTÜCK* ELEMENTS

A) An Introduction to the Selected Plays: Besuchszeit and Sibirien

As mentioned in chapter 1, Besuchszeit and Sibirien are Mitterer's most popular plays. Besuchszeit is his fifth play and was first performed in 1985.¹ It grew out of a series of four radio plays that Mitterer had produced for ORF Studio Tirol during the seventies. The acts are named "Abstellgleis," "Verbrecherin," "Weizen auf der Autobahn," and "Man versteht nichts," and appear in this order in the version of Besuchszeit contained in the two-volume collection of Mitterer's works, Stücke. These short plays are bound by the theme of the interaction between visitors to, and inmates of, various institutions.

"Abstellgleis" centres on the conversation between a woman and her step-father, who has been placed in an old-age home. The tension between the characters is palpable as the woman speaks of her family problems, and her step-father reveals the condescending manner in which he is treated in the home. Both are so enmeshed in their own problems that they are unable to connect on an emotional level. But the concerns of the old man dominate the story, revealing the cold, sterile nature of the home. The play

¹For a chronological list of Mitterer's plays according to the year in which they were first performed, refer to the Appendix.

ends by emphasizing the old man's isolation: his step-daughter has put down his dog, the one creature that he loved, because it, like him, was old and inconvenient.

"Verbrecherin" concentrates on a husband's visit to his wife, who has been imprisoned for stabbing him. The reasons for this attack are gradually revealed — a loveless marriage, the pressures of her traditional female roles, and the lack of emotional support from her husband and family. It becomes apparent that imprisonment has improved her circumstances, giving her time to reflect upon her past life. But the visit dissolves into a series of accusations which expose her husband's bullying nature. Due to the couple's inability to communicate, they are unable to resolve their problems, and the husband leaves, never to return. The audience, however, gains an understanding of their marital problems which have resulted from this inability to communicate.

In "Weizen auf der Autobahn," problems resulting from unrestrained development are revealed as a daughter visits her father who was placed in a psychiatric ward for interfering with a highway being built near their farm. The reasons for his mental state are gradually revealed: his family set him and his way of life aside to establish a hotel. Although seemingly insane, the old man's words about the conspiracy of the "Elektrische" to destroy all life on this planet symbolize much about progress. Reconciliation is hinted at, but all hope of this is destroyed when his daughter refuses to release him from the asylum without first consulting her husband, whom the old man sees as the perpetrator of the conspiracy. The act ends with the old farmer's final descent into

madness.

The final act, "Man versteht nichts," depicts a series of visits of an old man to his hospitalized wife. The act shows much about their daily existence, problems and mutual dependency. The conversations originally revolve around her illness, but gradually move to his fears of being laid-off from the factory where he has worked all his life. Based upon the relationship of Mitterer's adoptive parents, "Man versteht nichts" reveals much about the unspoken frustrations and love of an old married couple, as well as feelings of powerlessness when confronted by faceless institutions such as the factory and the hospital. In the end, the old woman, who was the source of strength and optimism in this relationship, dies, leaving her husband alone to face the emptiness of his world.

Ideas introduced in the first act, "Abstellgleis," were later expanded into a seventy-minute monologue, Sibirien. This play demonstrates the role of an old-age home in the gradual physical and emotional decay of an old man. Mitterer portrays this nameless man's fight to maintain a sense of dignity in this inhuman environment. Sibirien was written after Mitterer attended a performance of Besuchszeit at the Stadttheater Klagenfurt in 1988. He was overwhelmed by Siegmund Bergelt's unsentimental, yet humorous portrayal of the old man in "Abstellgleis," and introduced himself to the actor after the performance. Bergelt, who is a member of two associations concerned with the quality of life of those dying in homes and hospitals, suggested making "Abstellgleis" into a full-length monologue. He referred Mitterer to various people, including

Magdalena Stöckler, a former nurse in an Austrian senior citizen's home, to obtain an insider's view of these institutions. Mitterer took Bergelt's advice and dedicated the resulting play, Sibirien, to this actor, who performed this piece in Telfs when it opened in the summer of 1989. The play was extremely topical because of a recent report revealing that at an old-age home in Lainz, some of the nurses had given troublesome patients lethal injections and deliberately neglected other inmates to make them fall ill and die. Mitterer's play was written before the scandal, and he admitted that reality outdid him in a brutal fashion because "ich mir vorsätzlichen Mord nicht vorstellen konnte" (Mitterer II 177).

Both Besuchszeit and Sibirien have been performed extensively throughout Austria and have begun to receive recognition throughout the rest of the world, a fact which will be examined further in chapter 3. As mentioned earlier, I have decided to investigate these works because they are Mitterer's most performed and popular pieces, and are therefore ideal for analyzing the appeal of his writing. Besides the factors already discussed in chapter 1, I have chosen these plays because both pieces are set in contemporary times and focus on the treatment of individuals in institutions. The two plays also develop in a similar fashion. The events leading to the placement of the individual in the institution are revealed, followed by an attempt at reconciliation. All hope is then lost as something occurs to widen the gap between the inmates and their families. Both works contain themes which I intend to address — problems in

communication and the dehumanizing effects of institutional settings. But I will also focus on two topics present only in Besuchszeit — difficulties associated with traditional gender roles and the destructive effects of unrestrained progress. The discussion of these four themes will dominate this chapter. I will also explore how Mitterer manipulates traditional *Volksstück* elements, such as dialect and stock characters, to strengthen his socially critical message. I will begin, however, by examining his themes.

B) Analyzing the Major Social Themes in Besuchszeit and Sibirien

As mentioned in chapter 1, Mitterer wishes to make people contemplate the unjust treatment of marginalized people in society. The characters in Besuchszeit and Sibirien are powerless in the strongest sense of the word — "second-class" people lacking money, privileges and power (Mitterer I 167). Mitterer portrays these individuals with empathy, permitting us to share their predicament and recognize the need for social change. In fact, Webb remarks that this "contribute[s] essentially to the playwright's popularity and success . . . [the portrayals] elicit understanding and sympathy in his audiences and contribute to those lasting impressions which make Mitterer's works so remarkable" (148). Although he occasionally manipulates our emotions in order to establish this sense of identity — a feature which has occasionally given rise to charges of sentimentality and will be discussed in chapter 3 — the themes he addresses are powerful ones which force

his audience to think about the topics presented.

As mentioned earlier, scholars have mainly concerned themselves with issues of communication and gender conflicts in Mitterer's works. Partly because there are few articles available on Besuchszeit and Sibirien, there is room for further discussion on these topics. I will examine communication difficulties in both plays, while gender issues are really only relevant to Besuchszeit. I will also focus on two other concerns which have remained largely unexamined by the critics, including the problems inherent to unrestrained progress in "Weizen auf der Autobahn," and the dehumanizing effect of institutions, which is dealt with in both plays. Each theme will be addressed in turn, and conclusions will be made as to the how they contribute to the effectiveness of Mitterer's work.

i) Issues of Communication in Besuchszeit and Sibirien

Mitterer stresses communication in his plays because of its importance in both relating to and understanding others. Without communication everyone becomes a victim, because, as Brokoph-Mauch states, the inability to communicate deprives people of their capability to articulate their problems (162). Mitterer identifies the difficulties which people experience when relating to one another and portrays the resulting dangers. He recognizes a potential for victimization in the Tyrolean mind-set, noting "daß wir

schwerer miteinander reden können" (Hassel and McMahon 27). In Besuchszeit he therefore portrays the pain resulting from the inability of the inmates and the visitors to openly discuss the economic, political and social constraints that bind them.

Mitterer makes it obvious that guilt and resentment play an important role in inhibiting communication. The inmates have generally been confined by their own families, which increases the stress of these visits since the callers are racked by guilt and would avoid coming altogether if they did not feel a sense of familial duty. The inmates, on the other hand, feel betrayed and are not inclined to chat politely. These layers of resentment and guilt permeate the opening moments of each act with awkwardness and painful periods of silence which express more about the underlying tensions than any shouting match. Conversations initially revolve around greetings and polite inquiries into health. There is an uncomfortable edge to this, however, since in places like old-age homes, a statement like "Wia gehts dir?" can be misinterpreted as a hope of approaching illness which could rid the visitor of this unpleasant obligation.

Difficulties also arise because, as Rodgers notes, the inmates are free from the normal social constraints on speech and thought (261). Rejected by their families and society, they therefore feel entitled to speak more openly about their situations than most "normal" people. This honesty influences the visitors to respond more openly as well. Long-buried feelings of guilt, betrayal and resentment become exposed, perhaps for the first time. For a few moments, it appears that lines of communication may be

reestablished, but too little has been said too late: the past stands between them and all hope of reconciliation.

Take, for instance, "Abstellgleis" in which a woman visits her father-in-law. She is obviously uncomfortable about being there, shown by her constant glances at her watch and her refusal to remove her coat. She has spent her life fighting real or imagined slights with silence, rather than open communication. Yet during this visit she opens up to her father-in-law about the pain she feels at her husband's affair. Initially he appears sympathetic, raving about how he will give his son a piece of his mind. But it is soon apparent that he is more upset about his son's neglect of his filial duties than the affair. If the old man had demonstrated sympathy towards his daughter-in-law, he might have been brought back into the family, but the moment in which they might have connected is lost.

These brief periods of potential connection rarely endure because the people involved approach their situations from dramatically different perspectives. For instance, in "Abstellgleis," the old man experiences the horrors of the institution first hand, while his daughter-in-law wishes to distance herself from the situation to avoid feelings of guilt. This leads to misunderstandings over situations such as his attempt to reveal how the home has marked him, permeating him with its "Gruftgestank! Leichengestank!" (Mitterer I 173). Ironically, she chooses to take him literally, explaining that he must bathe more often. Problems cannot be solved if both parties are not willing to

acknowledge them.

An inability to speak to others about critical issues and acknowledge one's own part in a problem can also lead to conflict, as revealed in "Verbrecherin." The husband cannot speak openly about the stabbing. To discuss this incident with his wife, he must distance himself from the event by reading the newspaper report as if they had not experienced the incident first hand. He is unable to ask why she did it, and skirts the issue by quoting the views of the prosecutor and the court psychiatrist. Later, instead of acknowledging his role in the incident, he blames the feminists, whom he believes have indoctrinated her. His pride in a crude letter he wrote to one of these women, using words such as "Sie sind eine dreckige Lügensau, und allein schon deshalb sollte man sie vergasen," shows the intolerant and vicious side of his character which might well have contributed to the stabbing (Mitterer I 183).

His wife is a quiet individual who is also unable to communicate. The stabbing incident resulted from her bottled-up anger. Although she claims not to understand her actions, throughout their conversation she reveals the tensions which led to this emotional eruption: a loveless marriage; a lack of time for herself, and her dependency on pills to get through the day. The conversation with her husband also betrays the reason she is unable to speak to him: he interrupts her constantly, forcing his opinions on her, declaring that she had insufficient grounds for what occurred. She thus feels obliged to apologize, shouldering the entire blame when the fault is partially his. If this is how they

communicated in the past, it is no wonder that her resentments grew and erupted in such a fashion. Her attack was certainly unmeditated. The newspaper describes how she suddenly turned on him while he was complaining about supper, stabbed him, and then continued cleaning up, taking refuge in her role and daily chores to escape what she had done: an excellent psychological portrait on Mitterer's part.

Mitterer does not use dialogue just to reveal communication difficulties. In "Man versteht nichts," he begins each scene with letters that the husband has written to his family and friends at Christmas. These messages demonstrate how difficult it is for him to share his emotions; they consist of Yuletide greetings and a brief mention of his wife's ailment. The extent of her illness and his depression over his lay-off are never addressed. Even the letter that he writes after she dies is terse, making his statement "Ich kenn mich nicht mehr aus" all the more heart-rending (Mitterer I 208). His wife was the only one he could speak to openly, and now he is alone with his depression.

Communication problems in Sibirien are more difficult to explore since this piece is a monologue. However, Mitterer does use this play to demonstrate the importance of maintaining open communication with those around you. When the old man is promising his daughter-in-law that he will become a better person, he reveals himself to be "ein Choleriker" who has succeeded in alienating himself from his entire family. His reassurances that he will find "jede idiotische Frisur" of the children wonderful, that he will eat her "neumodische Speise" without complaint, and watch football games with his

son while praising "diese wunderbaren, sportlichen, jungen Kämpfer!" demonstrate his inability to understand or accept their lifestyle (Mitterer II 193-194). He acknowledges that this lack of communication is his fault, noting that he has always been short-tempered with his son and made no effort to connect with him. The old man also felt free to bully his son and family because, as he constantly reminds his daughter-in-law, they are using his apartment. The accident and his placement in the home changed everything, though. No one wants him back, even when he offers to give them his savings with no strings attached. He has never communicated with them and they therefore feel no obligation towards him. He attempts to rectify this by sharing his emotions with his son during a "visit," yet this is too little too late. They abandon him, forcing him to pay for his past indifference.

The hazards resulting from a lack of communication play, including the violent eruption of repressed emotions, constant condemnation, misunderstanding, and total isolation or abandonment, play a key role in Besuchszeit. The small talk beginning each act demonstrates Mitterer's understanding of how feelings of guilt and resentment can inhibit conversation. Ironically, institutional confinement eventually results in more open discussion since the inmates feel little need for tact and the visitors respond more openly in return. Yet this openness has come too late for these individuals: past wrongs preclude all chances of reconciliation. But Mitterer hopes that by presenting us with these portraits, we will recognize the obstacles that we ourselves must overcome in communicating with

others and remedy the situation before it is too late.

ii) The Portrayal of Traditional Female Roles in Besuchszeit

Mitterer recognizes that women are often not treated fairly by society. He presents his female characters in their traditional capacities of mothers, wives, and daughters, wanting us to question the assumptions behind these roles and realize "[s]o dürfte das mit uns nicht weitergehen" (Hassel and McMahon 26). Mitterer appears genuinely concerned about the unequal balance of power in traditional male/female relationships. In his interview with Hassel and McMahon, he indicates his desire to have people look at this imbalance and ask "ob sich in diesem Fall die Beziehung zwischen den Geschlechtern nicht endlich ändern sollte, daß die gerechter wird und partnerschaftlicher" (Hassel and McMahon 26). He accomplishes this by presenting women with an unusual degree of skill and sympathy, a fact Beth Bjorklund acknowledges when discussing why the *Volksstück* is dominated by male authors.²

Mitterer gives some of his women a depth of strength and character usually

² "The *Volksstück* is obviously not the only literary genre that ignores women's issues; its lack of interest is, however, incongruent with its professed societal concern . . . It should also be said that there are differences; and some contemporary *Volksstücke*, particularly those by Mitterer, offer a more insightful portrayal of women." Beth Bjorklund, "A Gender-linked Genre or Why Women do not Write *Volksstücke*." Modern Austrian Literature 26.3-4 (1993): 137-38.

reserved for men. For example, in "Man versteht nichts," the wife provides emotional strength despite the fact that she is sick in the hospital. Although the play initially focuses on her illness, it gradually shifts towards the problems of her husband. He is lonely because of her absence, and depressed by first the threat, and then the reality of being laid-off. He brings his problems to her since he has nowhere else to go. His male "friendships" involve destructive elements such as gambling, drinking and brooding. His total dependence on her for emotional support is as detrimental to him as the dependence of their male canary to its mate: the female plucks out its feathers, yet it pines away when placed in a separate cage for its own protection (Mitterer I 203). Like this bird, the old man can not cope with the world without his other half.

Despite her illness, his wife remains optimistic, planning how to overcome the lay-off. She uses this event to distract herself from her own problems, endeavouring to ward off this blow to his self-esteem and constantly reassuring him that she will return home soon. She has always been the strong one, the one to look for solutions, as illustrated by their dissimilar views on her inability to conceive. She suggests adopting a child, because "A Kind is a Kind," while he can only see that "A angenommens Kind is koa eigenes . . . nit von mein Bluat" (Mitterer I 200). She is less selfish, being more attentive to his needs than he is to hers. He means well, but brings her things she cannot eat, forgets the magazines she asks for and replies "Hoffentlich denk i drauf" when she asks him to bring some novels the next time he visits (Mitterer I 198). Their relationship,

however, has continued for so long that bad habits, thoughtlessness and minor annoyances do not matter because they truly care for and depend on one another. This quality also lends a certain beauty to an act which consists of little but conversation about everyday events.

In "Weizen auf der Autobahn" and "Abstellgleis," women are supportive in different ways. They are expected to care for ailing family members, maintain ties with those outside the family unit, and deny their own wishes to support those of others. The former two situations are apparent in "Abstellgleis" in which the old man's daughter-in-law rather than his son conducts the obligatory visit. Although unrelated by blood, she feels compelled to maintain emotional support within the family. This, however, leads to awkwardness because it was mainly her inability to cope with the demands of the old man which led to his confinement. Yet we can not condemn her for this: she carried the burden of his care unaided by her family. As she states, "Es war zviel für mi! I bin sowieso schon für drei Leut der Putzfetzen! Und da hast a Pfleg!" (Mitterer I 170). As well, she obviously cares about the old man, since she takes the time to visit him knowing that her husband is busy elsewhere and will not fulfil his filial responsibilities.

In "Weizen auf der Autobahn," Mitterer criticizes women who passively accept the wishes of their spouses. In this act, the daughter is so supportive of her husband, Rudi, that she is unable to deny any of his wishes. She does not protest when Rudi changes the farm into a hotel because that is what he wants to do. Her own wishes are

secondary. Her father recognizes that she has no power in the marriage: "Die Erika bestimmt a nix. Ihr Mann bestimmt" (Mitterer I 189). In the end it is this inability to make her own decisions which causes her father's complete withdrawal from reality. Although she has planned all aspects of her father's release, she says that he "Muaßt ma halt a bißl Zeit lassen. Daß i den Rudi überzeug," little knowing that Rudi plays a large role in her father's paranoia (Mitterer I 195). This act thus indicates that a passive, supportive role is not the best to maintain.

In "Verbrecherin," Mitterer demonstrates the potential dangers of traditional female roles in his sympathetic presentation of an overworked housewife. At home she was practically a slave, holding down a job and carrying out the roles of mother, wife and care-giver: hard burdens to bear unaided. This stress, combined with the uncaring nature of her husband and her inability to communicate her unhappiness, resulted in a pill dependency, and — ultimately — the stabbing. Ironically, the set routine of the prison improves her existence, giving her time for herself: something she has never had. She is free to reflect upon the intolerable conditions of her previous life and consider her own sense of identity. She finds this sense of freedom odd, remarking "Frei, verstehst du? Frei! Da im Gfängnis!" (Mitterer I 179). Yet this freedom has permitted her to grow. During the visit, she is able to express her unhappiness with her former situation and even reprimands her husband for regarding her imprisonment as a vacation, stating "Du redst dumm daher. Du plapperst nach. Hast ja koa Ahnung!" (Mitterer I 179). This evidence of

her new-found self-esteem indicates there is hope that she will become her own person.

Mitterer presents his female characters in a surprisingly sympathetic fashion for a male author. He promotes their strengths: their ability to survive indifference and near slavery to find freedom, and to provide support and solutions when men have given up. As well, he presents them with a degree of understanding which forces us to consider conventional female roles. He questions whether women alone should be responsible for providing emotional support to family members; objects to their tendency to play a passive part in the relationship, and protests their inclination to sustain others to the detriment of their own mental and physical health. Through these portrayals, Mitterer hopes to make us consider "ob sich in diesem Fall die Beziehung zwischen den Geschlechtern nicht endlich ändern sollte, daß sie gerechter wird . . . daß es vielleicht viel schöner wäre, wenn sie gleichwertige Partner wären, daß dann das Leiden auf beiden Seiten weniger wäre" (Hassel and McMahon 26).

iii) The Problem of Unrestrained Progress in "Weizen auf der Autobahn"

In his works, Mitterer has frequently addressed the difficulties arising from unrestrained progress related to tourism. This theme plays a major role in "Weizen auf der Autobahn," and is also present in works such as his first play, Kein Platz für Idioten, and two of his television series, Verkaufte Heimat and Die Piefke-Saga. Mitterer has

mixed feelings regarding this issue. Having grown up in rural Tyrol, he recognizes that tourism provides needed finances for numerous individuals. He notes, nonetheless, that many people have taken this need for financial gain to extremes, neglecting their families in the process. There has also been a loss of self-sufficiency as family farms are transformed into tourist resorts. The rhythm of life in the region has also changed, and ski resorts have done a great deal of damage to the surrounding countryside (Hassel and McMahon 32).

In "Weizen auf der Autobahn," Mitterer combines his feelings on tourism with a theme that his audience would recognize from the conventional *Volksstück*. Herzmann mentions the traditional subject which Mitterer uses in this play: the farmer who will not relinquish his farm to his aging son (Herzmann I 177). Aspects of this are still visible in the play, but Mitterer has updated the idea. In this act, the old man gives his property to his son-in-law, Rudi, who swears to continue farming. But being of a "progressive" generation, Rudi leaps at an opportunity to set himself up in the hotel industry, breaking his word and destroying the old man's former way of life. This theme has more relevance to modern audiences since difficulties associated with tourism in Tyrol currently have more far-reaching effects than inheritance problems.

The issues of tourism and unrestrained progress which Mitterer examines take on a human aspect through the old farmer. This man literally loses his mind after watching his lifestyle and the land that he loves being destroyed in the name of wealth and

progress. His pain is all the greater because he has been betrayed by his family in the process, being forced to watch as they attain their dream by demolishing his farm. They insult him further by failing to understand how much his old way of life meant to him, and cause him to feel useless in their new one because he is too old to carry suitcases for the hotel. It is no wonder that he becomes paranoid and retaliates against the form of progress which began it all: the highway. He strikes back by using the traditional farming methods they have set aside: ploughing up the highway, manuring the freshly paved surface, and sowing wheat on it during the opening ceremonies. He takes great delight in these small victories. His family, however, are unable to comprehend his actions, seeing only the damage and the fines they must pay. In an extremely ironic twist of fate he is imprisoned for being a threat to "[s]i selber und für die Umwelt" (Mitterer I 189).

If his family had been more considerate the old farmer might have been able to accept the hotel and the highway. Progress is not inherently evil, although it may appear so when its proponents refuse to acknowledge the feelings and opinions of others, forcing a lifestyle upon them which they find repugnant. Rudi becomes guilty of this by disregarding his father-in-law's wishes on how to use the land. In so doing, he becomes the focus of the old man's paranoid fantasies in which machines, called the "Elektrischer," are intent on destroying the natural world. Yet the old man's words ring true. Mitterer uses the old theme of the wise fool to reveal much about the attitudes of the modern world. The farmer's stories about the "Elektrischer" reflect the mentality of those who

promote the need for progress above any kind of life, whether it is the tree which survived so much to be cut down to make room for the highway, or the farm life, which was pushed aside for the sake of tourism, or family life, which is disintegrating around the old farmer's daughter due to a lack of time and money. Because Rudi embraced progress with little regard for human concerns, it is no wonder that the old man sees him as the head of the "Elektrischer."

Mitterer emphasizes the shallow, empty nature of what Rudi has created in the name of tourism, and the dependency which it brings. The hotel has been built for appearances. The old man describes it as "[ein] Haus wie in an Heimatfilm" (Mitterer I 191). There is no real cultural aspect or depth to it — it is built to reflect the expectations of the tourists. Their new vocation is also problematic due to its dependence on weather favourable for tourist activities — business is bad at the moment because it has not snowed. They could maintain a steady cash flow by raising pigs, but the guests might find the odour offensive so this is not a viable option. The changes which they have made to their lifestyle have therefore impeded their hopes of self-sufficiency.

It is obvious that Mitterer feels strongly about the effect which tourism has had on Tyrol. The exaggerated actions of the old farmer become a symbol demonstrating that progress must be balanced with some degree of consideration for those who are being affected so they are not made to feel useless. Questions of self-sufficiency should also be taken under consideration when "improvements" are made to one's lifestyle, for it may

not be as profitable as expected. If not careful, both the old and the new way of life may be lost due to insufficient funds and an inability to support oneself.

iv) "Krankenhäuser machen krank, Altersheime alt": The Horrors of Institutional Existence

Both Besuchszeit and Sibirien demonstrate the potentially harmful nature of institutions and those who run them. With the exception of the prison in "Verbrecherin," which, as discussed above, provided a place for the woman to reflect upon her past life, the institutions and their staff harm those they are supposed to help. Part of this is due to the dehumanizing nature of the institutional environment and the attitudes of those who run it. But part is also due to the fact that the inmates have lost control over their everyday existence, resulting in debilitating feelings of helplessness. They therefore retaliate against visiting family members, creating further emotional damage between themselves and their families. This section will focus briefly on the destructive aspects of the hospital in "Man versteht nichts" and the asylum in "Weizen auf der Autobahn." The greater part will concentrate on the two most powerful and disturbing images of the harmful effects of institutions: the old-age homes portrayed in "Abstellgleis" and Sibirien.

"Man versteht nichts" illustrates the damage which can be done when those who

staff the institutions are unwilling to acknowledge patient problems or share information. The doctors in this act do both things, which Mitterer presents as a common prejudice faced by patients if doctors are unable to discover an obvious cause for an illness. When the woman in this act initially approached the doctors with her symptoms, they refused to take her seriously although she was quite ill, shrugging her complaints off as laziness. The woman summarizes the head doctor's attitude on the hysterical nature of the female sex: "Ihr Weiber wollts nix arbeiten, so is des, hat er zu mir gesagt. Sobaldst auf zwoa Fiaß stehn kannst, bist für den wieder gsund" (Mitterer I 201). Later, the doctors refuse to share information with her and avoid saying when she can go home. This inability to obtain straight answers causes feelings of hopelessness and despair, which will certainly not improve her health or her frame of mind. Her husband is unable to comfort her with regards to her treatment at the hands of the doctors, merely acknowledging "Jaja, da kannst nix machen. Gegen die Leut kommst nit auf" (Mitterer I 201). A vicious circle is created, these feelings of helplessness contributing to the cause of their victimization — "Man erduldet, stellt keine Fragen" (Dietrich).

In contrast, "Weizen auf der Autobahn" suggests that the asylum contributed to the old farmer's insanity. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the community committed him for being a threat to himself and the environment. Yet from the description of the circumstances which led to his incarceration, he did not appear crazy: bitter and creative in his ways of retaliating, but not crazy. However, when the play opens, his refusal to

acknowledge his daughter's identity or even speak with her until she pretends she is a friend of hers raises the question of whether he is unbalanced or using emotional blackmail. His daughter feels he is playing games, accusing "Du verstellst di! Weilst an Zorn hast auf mi" (Mitterer I 186). But Mitterer keeps the question open by emphasizing the apparent sincerity behind the old farmer's words in the stage directions.

The likelihood that this is a game increases as the play progresses. The old man claims he is unable to recall the events leading to his imprisonment, although he is quick to prompt his daughter whenever she is slow in relating them. He controls the conversation, questioning her and causing her to lose her temper to draw out the facts he wishes her to consider. Once she has acknowledged them, he admits that she is his daughter. He also makes the telling remark that he would have preferred to be imprisoned since there he would not suffer shots, pills, and shock therapy. He begs her to save him from these "treatments," stating that "Die machen mir's Hirnkastl kaputt" (Mitterer II 188). Perhaps this "therapy" explains the odder aspects of the conversation, such as the "reading" of the wood and the talk of the "Elektrischen." Yet he is still lucid enough that his daughter considers freeing him. But all control is lost when he discovers that she will not do so without her husband's consent. He now considers her part of the conspiracy and suffers a total breakdown. We can still wonder though if he was sane when he was brought to the asylum and whether it was the shots, pills and shock therapy, combined with his daughter's actions, which destroyed his mind.

Both "Abstellgleis" and Sibirien deal with life in old-age homes, permitting us to see how Mitterer develops this theme. These works emphasize how the elderly are shunted off into old-age homes when they become problematic: hence the aptness of the first play's title, "Abstellgleis." Mitterer hints at the source of these problems: the time constraints imposed by modern life. Few individuals wish to care for their elderly parents, especially if the latter are temperamental or require extra attention due to a disability. The elderly can therefore expect to spend their final days institutionalized if they do not have sufficient funds for private care. Mitterer demonstrates the appalling surroundings that face those in lower quality homes, conditions which threaten to divest the inmates of the last vestiges of humanity and dignity to which they can cling.

The earlier piece, "Abstellgleis," lacks the atrocities found in Sibirien, but it does demonstrate the prejudices faced by the elderly. The old man reveals that the staff treats the inmates as weak, feeble-minded children rather than responsible adults. Generally, he finds this annoying because his mind is still sharp, as demonstrated by the barbed nature of some of his comments; for example, in a seemingly understanding reply to his daughter-in-law's apology for not visiting earlier — "Wer geht schon gern ins Altersheim?" — he criticizes his family for placing him in the home (Mitterer I 169). But occasionally, he uses the staff's preconceived notions to his advantage, being overcome by sudden waves of "weakness" on bath days so that the nurses will bathe him. Nonetheless, the old man finds this constant condescending manner discouraging as seen

in a statement that he repeats bitterly throughout the play: "Opa, tua brav auf essen, sonst gibt's kein Kompott." Perhaps acceptable when speaking to an unruly child, a phrase like this should not be used on an adult. He therefore repeats this statement whenever he is confronted with attitudes which imply he is feeble-minded, making it a mantra indicative of the social prejudices faced by the elderly.

Mitterer also shows the irony which exists in calling this institution a "home" because it makes no pretext of providing a homelike environment. The institutional aspect of the place is apparent: the food is bland; the beds are too high; and the rooms all look alike so he becomes easily disorientated. The old man receives care, but no physical or emotional contact with others: an integral part of human existence. His sense of isolation is increased since he is separated from the one living thing that means anything to him, his dog. He is even forbidden to take unannounced evening strolls to visit his old haunts. He retaliates with spirited words and writes a letter to the President of the Federal Republic complaining about the quality of the food. He refuses to permit others, including his daughter-in-law, to refer to him as "Opa," a term which he finds patronizing. Yet the atmosphere of the home has begun to take its toll: he loses hours at a time by taking refuge in sleep or staring at the wall. It will not be long before his unstimulating surroundings and the attitudes that he faces mould him into the old, feeble-minded individual that they consider him to be.

"Abstellgleis" thus acquaints us with the dehumanizing aspects of an old-age

home which encourage the inmates to regress into a child-like state: the condescending attitudes of the staff; the lack of physical and emotional contact with animals or other human beings; and the sterile and unstimulating nature of the environment. It is a prison rather than a "home": an idea which Mitterer develops further in his next play on this topic.

Sibirien provides a harsher view of reality. The old man considers his confinement to be his "zweite Deportation in diesem Leben./Die erste nach Sibirien!/ Als Kriegsgefangener./Die zweite in dieses Heim!/Auch ein Sibirien!" — hence the title of this piece (Mitterer II 180). The parallel is appropriate since the inmates of the home are treated like prisoners. They are forbidden to do anything which could harm them, including eating regular food and moving about, and are confined in this sterile, joyless environment until freed by death. Ironically, the old man found the prison camp more humane since the prisoners were permitted to use their minds, learning chess and Russian. As well, they could contemplate a release other than death.

The home is far colder than Siberia ever was although the chill filling its halls is due to indifference rather than to a physical cold. The inmates are treated as units to be fed and given basic care until they expire to make room for the next lot. The old man comments on the indifference displayed by the staff, describing it as:

Das schlimmste aller Gefühle.
Nein, kein Gefühl.
Der absolute Mangel an Gefühl.

Gefühlskälte.
Kälte.
Tausendmal kälter
als die klirrende Kälte Sibiriens.

(Mitterer II 201)

The indifference of the staff shows that the institution is meant for the caregivers rather than the patients. Only certain behaviour is acceptable, and inappropriate conduct, such as verbal protests, leads to punishment meant to break the spirit. For example, when the old man objects to his placement in the home, he is sedated and kept tied to his bed for three days, clad in diapers like a child. It is a devastating blow to his dignity. When he endeavours to be polite, he is permitted to hobble around on crutches, but the moment he displays a sign of weakness — a fall in this case — he is confined to bed. Unable to exercise properly and forbidden to sing or express his discontent openly, his physical and emotional state declines. The quality of his treatment deteriorates as well, and he is punished for being unable to control his bowels: they force him to sit in his own waste, and when he complains, he is again sedated and restrained. Under these conditions it is no wonder that he begins to wish for "[e]in halbwegs würdevoller Abgang" (Mitterer II 217).

In an environment set on destroying one's self-worth, any display of independence becomes very important. This was alluded to in "Abstellgleis," in which the old man asserted his self-reliance by taking a midnight stroll and refusing his daughter-in-law's help when sitting down (Mitterer I 172, 169). In Sibirien, the oppressive atmosphere of the home causes small issues which we take for granted to become matters of great pride

for the old man: he can go to the bathroom by himself; he has his own teeth; and he can walk, sit, and move on his own. But as the play progresses and the home gradually erodes his body and spirit, the old man begins to lose these abilities as well. Yet he continues to fight as the option is unthinkable: the other inmates are "[b]lütenweiß überzogen und glattgestrichen./Alle wie tot./Sauber gewaschen und gestriegelt./Keiner rührt sich" (Mitterer II 200). They have given up hope, something he wishes to avoid for as long as possible. He does this for a time using his savings account to provide him with some control over his life. With this money, he bribes the staff into giving him a walker and the freedom to move about. He also buys human contact since the nurses will expose their breasts and let him touch them for the right price. However, when he foolishly gives his money to his family as a gesture of good will, his privileges are removed and he is tyrannized by the staff.

Although Sibirien provides a harsher view of the institution, its ending is less effective than that of "Abstellgleis," which emphasizes the parallel between the old man and his dog. "Abstellgleis" demonstrates that the old man is closer to this animal than to his own flesh and blood, as is shown when he gives his daughter-in-law some loose change for his granddaughter and 500 schillings for the dog. He inquires constantly about his pet, until, just before leaving, she admits that they put the animal down because it was old (Mitterer I 176). She departs, leaving him alone with the knowledge that the one thing which gave his life meaning has been destroyed. After hearing about the man's present

circumstances, it is easy to wonder who had been treated more mercifully: the dog, which escaped a loveless environment without her master; or the old man, who is forced to continue his joyless existence until he finds refuge in death.

The last scene in Sibirien is not as powerful. Many critics, including Brokoph-Mauch, find it weak in comparison to the earlier portions of the play.³ I agree, for although the old man's hallucinations emphasize his complete mental and physical deterioration, the final moments of the play in which he mentions that his dog has been put down, retreats into memories of his wife and then bids the world farewell to join his loved ones is coloured by sentimentality. As Dorothee Hammerstein comments, it is "ein bißchen flau."⁴ In comparison, I find the finality of the old man's isolation in "Abstellgleis" more effective at highlighting the need for social change.

With the exception of "Verbrecherin," these plays all emphasize the problems inherent to institutions. Christoph Hirschmann's observation that "Krankenhäuser machen krank, Altersheime alt" holds true.⁵ These establishments and their staffs rob people of

³Brokoph-Mauch comments: "Jedoch auch bei einer schauspielerischen Spitzenleistung ist es nicht zu leugen, daß der zweite Teil, die Anrede an den Ministerpräsident, dem Autor weniger geglückt ist als der erste Teil, der im Gegensatz zu den Todesfantasien am Ende die Gradwanderung [sic] zwischen Anklage und Pathos, Empfindung und Sentimentalität erfolgreicher übersteht als der zweite" (158).

⁴Dorothee Hammerstein, Weltwoche, 30 Jan. 1992.

⁵Christoph Hirschmann, "Kälter als in Sibirien." This article was obtained from the Innsbrucker Zeitungsarchiv. Unfortunately, they were unable to provide the name of the periodical it appeared in or the date of the article.

their humanity and dignity by refusing to give information or support and by providing treatment which harms rather than helps. The inmates become weak and helpless because they are forced to conform to the notion of what they should be rather than maintain their individuality. Family members are either helpless or do not give support, emphasizing the gravity of the situation and the powerlessness of all involved.

In the previous sections, I have examined the major themes of Besuchszeit and Sibirien in an attempt to understand how Mitterer, unlike most authors associated with the new socially critical *Volksstück*, has avoided alienating his intended audience. What chord has he struck in his viewers so that he is able to explore provocative themes and still appeal to a wide audience? One factor is the relevance of the topics which he addresses. He focuses on issues which we can recognize from our daily lives, including how a lack of communication can lead to serious misunderstandings between individuals, problems resulting from the traditional roles that women are called upon to fulfil, the dangers involved in promoting progress above more human concerns, and the often inhuman nature of institutional environments. These are concerns which affect everyone, ones which we can easily recognize from our own lives or in the world around us. Who, after all, can claim that they have never experienced difficulties in communicating their feelings effectively to others, has not seen someone suffering from the expectations of traditional gender roles, has not been affected in some way by the ever-quickenning pace

of progress or has not read about some institution which has had an adverse effect on those under its care? Mitterer presents some of the problems which can arise under these circumstances, hoping that we will reflect on similar situations in our own lives and attempt to change things for the better.

Underlining the above factor is the human approach which Mitterer takes to his themes. He appears to understand the sufferings of his characters, the motivations for their actions, and the tensions which can arise between people. More importantly, he can portray this understanding in a believable fashion. We can look at what is occurring, acknowledge that we have felt similarly, and admire the apparent ease with which he accomplishes this. The relevance, clarity and humanity with which Mitterer presents his vision of the world contributes to his ability to address provocative themes without alienating his audience. He realizes that his message will only affect certain individuals "die guten Willens sind, die zu einer positiven Veränderung in unserer Gesellschaft beitragen wollen." But he feels that even if he can make some individuals reflect upon their lives, it is "zumindest ein Beginn" (Mitterer I 11). In the next section, I will examine how Mitterer has modified the traditional *Volksstück*, bringing artistic aspects to this provincial genre, while still retaining its roots.

C) The Use of Traditional *Volksstück* Elements in Besuchszeit and Sibirien

As discussed in chapter 1, *Volksstück* is a general term referring to a popular Austrian theatre tradition consisting of several types of plays bound by the use of regional dialect, stock characters, songs, humour and happy endings: elements meant to appeal to and entertain the *Volk*. Mitterer utilizes aspects of this tradition to connect with the ordinary people of Tyrol who are familiar with this type of theatre. But he does not feel the need to speak down to them when doing so, and believes they should be provided with something challenging to view. In an interview with Hassel and McMahon he concludes that, "Natürlich, wenn man ihnen die leichte Unterhaltung vorsetzt, dann nehmen sie die leichte Unterhaltung. Aber wenn man ihnen was Schwierigeres gibt, nehmen sie das auch. Nur, glaube ich, darf es nicht langweilig sein; und dann müssen sie Menschen sehen, also nicht irgendwelche Kunstfiguren" (22). He therefore uses conventional *Volksstück* elements to provide signposts for his traditionally-minded audience, maintaining a style which is familiar to them. But Mitterer modifies these elements to strengthen his themes. As Brokoph-Mauch remarks, Mitterer makes "das Vertraute verfremdet und das Stereotype neu belebt" (154). In this section, I will examine his transformation of both the *Volksstück* and its traditional components, including dialect, character, music, humour and happy endings.

Traditionally, the *Volksstück* has no set number of acts. Mitterer adheres to this

principle although he prefers to divide his plays into scenes rather than acts. But Mitterer moves beyond the boundaries of the traditional *Volksstück* in Besuchszeit and Sibirien. Besuchszeit consists of four separate stories linked by a common theme. With the exception of "Man versteht nichts," which consists of several visits over a few days, these short plays focus on the interaction between two people at a given moment, emphasizing the snapshot quality of the play. Sibirien resembles a collage more than a single photograph. It is divided into five scenes which take place over a period of time, thus permitting more issues to be addressed than in "Abstellgleis." The old man's gradual physical decay and eventual death are symbolized through his position relative to an institutional bed. Initially, he asserts his independence by hobbling around it, first on crutches, then with a walker. As the institution destroys his spirit, he is gradually drawn to the bed, first perching on its side, then sitting on it, and finally, lying down. His emotional state deteriorates as well, as shown through his gradual loss of pride in his appearance. These visible signs of his decline emphasize his appalling treatment at the hands of the institution.

Sibirien also pushes the borders of the traditional *Volksstück* in that it is a monologue, a modern dramatic form not associated with this genre. The play is also unusual in that it is written to resemble free verse. Each paragraph begins with a short phrase centred on the page. The sentences gradually increase in length, being placed one under another, until, as the paragraph comes to a close, they fade into a series of short

utterances which reiterate previous phrases. The shape of the paragraph combined with the use of repetition echoes the ebb and flow of the nameless hero's pain, as seen in the following passage:

Pflege!
 Was für eine Pflege?
 Was für eine Pflege denn?
 Es gibt doch keine Pflege!
 Abfütterung!
 Abtopfung!
 Abwaschung!
 Das ist die Pflege!
 Die brauch ich nicht!
 Ich brauch sie nicht!
 Ich bin am falschen Ort, verstehst du?
 Ich brauche diese Pflege nicht!
 Ich brauche dieses Sibirien nicht!
 Ich kann mich ja bewegen!
 Ich kann ja gehen!
 Siehst du, wie ich gehe?
 Siehst du es?

(Mitterer II 181)

It also emphasizes the circumstances in the home: the old man's habit of repeating himself and changing the topic during the "conversation" are typical of an elderly person, especially one who is unaccustomed to interacting with others. This stresses the idea that he is forced to talk to himself because there is no one else around: a common situation in an old-age home. Critics have compared this repetitive quality to the works of Thomas Bernhard, a fact which will be examined further in chapter 3.

Traditionally, the *Volksstück* has been performed in dialect, permitting local audiences to identify with the characters. This has ensured the genre's association with

regional concerns. Mitterer, like many authors of the new socially critical *Volksstück*, uses local dialect to create characters who are representatives of a certain region, permitting the audience to relate to them more easily. Mitterer explains that he changes the language of the characters according to the era in which a play occurs, as well as the origin, profession and class of the individuals.⁶ Unfortunately, this can limit the audience of a play. Jones mentions that most contemporary *Volksstück* authors ensure that their work is not limited to a specific group by creating a general, rather than a specific dialect (215). Mitterer takes a different approach. Although he initially composes his works in Tyrolean dialect, his concern that his plays be accessible to everyone often results in the pieces being rewritten in the regional dialect of the area in which they are to be performed, e.g., Viennese for performances in Vienna (Mitterer I 7). Mitterer neglects to mention who undertakes this task, but he does indicate that he always produces a version in High German to ensure that his works are accessible in other German-speaking countries. In fact, Mitterer broke entirely with the *Volksstück* tradition by initially writing Sibirien in High German because he felt that it addressed a more universal theme (Mitterer I 7). This use of High German in this piece also emphasizes that it is not merely less educated individuals, like those in Besuchszeit, who must struggle against the institutional mind set.

⁶Although Besuchszeit and Sibirien are contemporary pieces, many of Mitterer's works are set in other times. For example, Kein schöner Land is set in 1933-1945, and Die Kinder des Teufels is set in 1678 in Salzburg.

Mitterer also explores the boundaries of conventional *Volksstück* elements such as the use of certain stock characters: the grumpy old man, the inconsiderate in-laws, and the bumbling village idiot. Traditionally, these characters are one-dimensional and behave in a stereotypical fashion. In Besuchszeit and Sibirien, Mitterer refers to this convention by not naming his characters in the script, instead referring to them by their roles, like "Alter," "Schwiegertochter," and "Er." Christian names may appear throughout the dialogue, but are not given prominence. The lack of importance attached to names both stresses Mitterer's use of typical characters and gives his plays a universal quality. It becomes more important to recognize the type of people and the situations they are experiencing rather than specific individuals.

But Mitterer's characters are not one-dimensional. He fleshes them out, creating human beings rather than cardboard cutouts. For instance, the grumpy old man in Sibirien does not merely rant and rave at others, expressing the stereotypical views of an older generation. Instead, Mitterer provides him with human emotions and reactions which make him an individual, bringing a serious note to the play by demonstrating the injustices suffered by the elderly. Höpfel in fact applauded Mitterer for creating a character in Sibirien who is "keine spezifische Type aus dem Volksstück" but "ein Mann aus Fleisch und Blut."⁷ This added humanity increases the effectiveness of his characters, permitting the audience to identify with them as people, not just as fellow Tyroleans.

⁷Jutta Höpfel, "Mitterer bewegend umgesetzt," Wiener Zeitung 18 May 1991.

Mitterer feels that this is important because "wenn man sieht, was ein Mensch durchmacht und was er leiden muß, da wird man vielleicht viel mehr davon berührt" (Hassel and McMahon 25).

Mitterer's characters also become more animated through the interesting and believable dialogues which he creates for them. Although Besuchszeit and Sibirien emphasize words rather than action, Mitterer's ability to perceive and reflect human nature makes the discussions between his characters quite credible. Höpfel in fact commended Mitterer for being an author "der das Leid seiner Mitmenschen wie eine Passion auf sich nimmt, nachvollzieht und widerspiegelt."⁸ This is reflected in Besuchszeit which consists of little but conversations between two individuals. Yet these dialogues are mesmerizing, exposing both the events which resulted in the confinement of the inmates and the tensions which exist between them and the visitors. Mitterer also ensures that the underlying reasons for any differences in opinion are revealed, presenting us with a surprisingly insightful view of how different people approach the same issue from dramatically different perspectives.

This ability lends a disturbing quality to Besuchszeit, for although it is clear in each case who the victim is, empathy can be felt for the visitors as well. Although individuals like the daughter-in-law in "Abstellgleis" are responsible for placing their family members in these institutions, their actions have been dictated by those around

⁸Jutta Höpfel, "Mitterer fand seinen 'Minetti' in dem großartigen Siegmund Bergelt," Neue Tiroler Zeitung 8 Aug. 1989.

them. We can sympathize with the daughter-in-law because she, as the woman of the house, would be expected to care for the old man, dealing with his constant complaints and any extra work he created. If the family shared in this task, it would not be as arduous, but they do not. She, like the other visitors, is thus a prisoner of social expectations. By portraying the "villains" with some degree of humanity, Mitterer presents a more accurate picture of the world. People are rarely good or evil: they fall somewhere in between depending upon their motivations.⁹ This ability to expose both sides of the story can be a difficult balancing act. But Mitterer succeeds, increasing the credibility of the situations which he portrays.

In Sibirien, it is more difficult to offer a complete picture of the circumstances since a monologue is inherently one-sided. The old man speaks to others over the course of the play, yet because these individuals do not appear in the piece, we neither hear their side of the story nor gain an insight into their motivations. We must accept the old man's opinions about his family and the reasons for his "imprisonment," which under the circumstances, are likely biased. The monologue format does, however, permit a thorough investigation of the old man's state of mind, the horrors of the situation he is experiencing and the flaws inherent to the system. Considering the brutal message which

⁹Günther Nenning supports this idea when speaking about the art of Mitterer's writing: "[D]ie Dichter leben davon, daß die Grenze zwischen Gut und Böse nicht *zwischen* den Menschen ist, sondern erreaktionär *mittendurch* durch jeden einzelnen." Günther Nenning, "Nazi, Jud' und Christ in Einem," profil 22 Feb. 1988: 62-63.

Mitterer wishes to convey regarding care in old-age homes, this focus on the victim's perspective is justified.

Entertaining songs are another element typically associated with the conventional *Volksstück*. But Mitterer ensures that the songs which appear in Besuchszeit and Sibirien contribute to his message rather than merely amuse. "Weizen auf der Autobahn," for example, opens and closes with a short piece: "Kloan bin i gwachsen, groß mag i nit wern, mei Muatter hat mi zügelt aus an Haselnußkern!" (Mitterer II 185). This song has a nonsensical quality which introduces both the setting of the insane asylum and the old farmer's state of mind. The line, "groß mag i nit wern," hints at his family's view of him: he is not "adult" enough to change to accommodate the highway which destroyed his lifestyle. This ditty's repetition at the end of the play also underscores the old man's rejection of his daughter's viewpoints and his retreat into a world of his own making. Consequently, the music aids in establishing the tone of this act as well as the old man's final state of mind.

Sibirien also strengthens its message through music. The old man sings to hold the negative effects of the home at bay (Mitterer II 207). He finds that it exercises his muscles, preventing the shrinking and shrivelling which results from the accelerated aging process promoted by the home. Singing also influences his emotional state, buoying his spirits and filling him with joy. But the staff's reaction to this harmless tune demonstrates the lethal nature of this environment. They hit him with wet diapers and

threaten to gag him if he continues his serenades. Pleasure is not permitted here since that might promote hope: an undesirable emotion in a place where the directive is, "Hinlegen und sterben!" (Mitterer II 181). The song thus emphasizes both the institution's retreat from the cause of the living, and how foreign the old man's lively spirit is in that place.

Another element which Mitterer modifies is humour. Typically, *Volksstück* humour consists of light-hearted slapstick or crude sexual innuendoes. But Mitterer's humour often has a pensive quality which emphasizes the serious nature of the problems he addresses. In "Abstellgleis," for example, we can laugh at the temerity of the old man who writes to the President of the Federal Republic to complain about the food, and who is overcome by "weakness" on bath days so the nurses will bathe him. Yet this also underscores the tragedy of his circumstances. Eating is no longer a pleasure, and he is so removed from human contact that a sponge bath from the nurses is his only sexual thrill. Although humorous, the situation is also quite moving and permits us to identify more closely to the old man and his problems.

Closely linked to Mitterer's use of humour is his use of irony. As seen throughout the previous sections of this chapter, Mitterer uses this element frequently. The ironic aspect of many situations was noted, such as the old man in "Weizen auf der Autobahn" being imprisoned for being a threat to his environment, or the woman in "Verbrecherin" feeling freer in prison than in her own home. Both Besuchszeit and Sibirien abound with such situations. "Verbrecherin" for example, contains a scene in which the husband

complains that his colleagues refer to him as a "Pantoffelheld" because his wife stabbed him. She replies by observing, "Ja, i woäß scho. Normalerweis bringen die Ehemänner ihre Frauen um, nit umgekehrt!" (Mitterer I 181). The irony inherent to this astute observation is calculated to spark an uneasy chuckle from the audience. Irony therefore gives Mitterer's words a bite which makes his plays more hard-hitting than traditional *Volksstücke*.

Mitterer's plays also differ from conventional *Volksstücke* in that they deal with sombre topics and end on a depressing note. The initial reaction to Kein Platz für Idioten, mentioned earlier in this chapter, demonstrates the disturbing effect which this can have if the audience is expecting the light-hearted subjects and trite, happy endings commonly associated with the *Volksstück*. Mitterer utilizes this expectation of a successful resolution to make his characters' fates all the more tragic, hinting at reconciliation but shattering all hope in the end, leaving both parties worse off than before. Take the old farmer in "Weizen auf der Autobahn" as an example. On the verge of making peace with his daughter and being released, he reverts to madness because she wishes to involve her husband in the proceedings. Mitterer thus avoids the formulaic endings of the conventional *Volksstück*, stressing instead one of life's realities: everything does not always end happily. His characters' despair underlines the tragedy of their situations and raises these everyday individuals to heroic proportions.¹⁰ The injustices they face

¹⁰Günther Nenning supports this when discussing the heroism of Mitterer's characters in Kein schöner Land. He remarks that "Die richtigen Mitterer-Helden siegen nie, sie kommen immer um."

demonstrate the need for change, yet the plays, like life, do not offer ready solutions.

Throughout this section, I have examined the changes which Mitterer has made to the conventional *Volksstück*, modifying traditional elements in such a fashion that his works are no longer *Volksstücke* in the usual sense of the word. Although its roots are still recognizable due to the use of elements such as dialect and ordinary characters, Besuchszeit differs from the norm in that it consists of four stories bound by the institutional theme. But Sibirien deviates so greatly that it is debatable whether it still belongs to this genre. Mitterer departs from tradition by writing this play in High German, a drastic move for a provincial genre generally associated with dialect. Although this cost Sibirien its regional roots, it also permitted the piece to spread quickly throughout German-speaking countries. Mitterer also employed monologue and free verse in Sibirien, modern dramatic structures not found in conventional *Volksstücke*. He has therefore gone beyond the traditional, exposing his intended audience to non-provincial theatre techniques and creating a more universal *Volksstück*.

Although Mitterer's plays employ conventional *Volksstück* elements which enable the audience to refer to the traditional genre, the elements are modified so that they emphasize his socially critical message rather than to merely entertain. He modifies the traditional characters, creating believable, human individuals with whom we can identify.

Dadurch siegen sie." Günther Nenning, "Nazi, Jud' und Christ in Einem," profil 22 Feb. 1988: 62-63.

He does not make extensive use of music and songs although when he does, they underscore various aspects of his message rather than entertain. His humour tends towards the tragic and the ironic rather than the crude and slap-stick. And unlike conventional *Volksstücke*, he never uses happy endings, instead raising his characters to heroic proportions through their sufferings at the hands of society. By modifying the *Volksstück* in such a manner, he provides a refreshingly unconventional look at society's problems, which, unlike many modern dramas, relies on realism and the ability to identify with his characters to promote the need for social change.

Despite his message, Mitterer does not consider himself to be a political author. But he does regard himself as a political person because he is interested in "die gesellschaftlichen Zusammenhänge" and hopes "daß sich die Gesellschaft und das Verhalten der Menschen zueinander zum Bessern verändert" (Hassel and McMahon 23). His emphasis is on addressing the people of rural Tyrol, who, he realizes, have been raised in an environment which is often "sehr moralisch und sehr konservativ." These people are therefore in greater need of his message than those who have had the benefit of more education or been raised in a more open-minded environment (Hassel and McMahon 31). To provide his intended audience with a point of reference, he employs elements of the traditional *Volksstück*. But he alters these features so that they go beyond mere entertainment value and reinforce his criticism of society. This widens his potential audience and indicates that he has moved the traditional *Volksstück* in more artistic

directions.

But how have critics responded to Mitterer's modification of the *Volksstück*? There has been little discussion of this in the scholarly literature because few have chosen to investigate Mitterer's works. On the other hand, reviews of his plays abound, and provide an excellent means of establishing other views of the strengths and weaknesses of his methods. The following chapter will therefore discuss the few scholarly articles available on Besuchszeit and Sibirien, as well as dozens of newspaper reviews of these plays in both Austria and Germany. This will familiarize the reader with other critical views of Mitterer's contribution to the *Volksstück*.

III. THE AUSTRIAN AND INTERNATIONAL CRITICAL RESPONSE TO BESUCHSZEIT AND SIBIRIEN

Mitterer has received little scholarly recognition in comparison to his contemporaries in Austria and Germany. The scholarly literature on him consists of eighteen articles and one interview, only four of which deal directly with Besuchszeit and Sibirien. But when examining Webb's article, "An Introduction to Mitterer and his Critics," I noted his conclusion that reviewers have contributed "more than any other group [of writers] to a general understanding of Mitterer's artistic production and to the specific strengths and weaknesses of his *oeuvre*" (7). I therefore determined that reviews would provide the best method of evaluating Mitterer's strengths and weaknesses.

In this chapter, I will first evaluate the four scholarly articles which deal with Besuchszeit and Sibirien. I will then examine Austrian reviews of these plays to determine the local response. In all, I will survey twenty-two reviews of eleven productions of Besuchszeit and thirty reviews of ten productions of Sibirien, probing the often contradictory reactions to Mitterer's plays. I will also provide a limited study of productions in other German-speaking lands to see how these plays have been received outside of Austria. This will include productions of Besuchszeit in Munich and Wolkenstein, and Sibirien in Bonn, Munich, Frankfurt and Zurich. But first, an examination of the scholarly response to these plays.

A. The Scholarly Response to Besuchszeit and Sibirien

Webb stressed the lack of scholarly material available on Mitterer and suggested three major reasons for this: Mitterer's strong connections to the culture and traditions of his native Tyrol; his ties to naturalism and television, which oppose the prevailing theatre dramaturgy; and the naiveté and simplicity of his works (1-2). The early secondary literature on Mitterer consisted of six papers and one interview from two recent symposiums on the *Volksstück* in California and Dublin. Only one paper discussed the plays which I am dealing with, Gudron Brokoph-Mauch's "Felix Mitterers Besuchszeit." Further articles became available in 1995 when Ariadne Press released Felix Mitterer: A Critical Introduction, a book containing thirteen papers regarding this author. But again, only two focused on Besuchszeit and Sibirien: Gerd K. Schneider's "Timely Meditations or Not Yet! Social Criticism in Felix Mitterer's Siberia," and an English translation of the Brokoph-Mauch piece mentioned earlier. Two further pieces dealt with "Verbrecherin," an act in Besuchszeit: Helga Schreckenberger's "Violence and Sexual Politics in Felix Mitterer's Plays "Verbrecherin," *Heim* and *Die Wilde Frau*," and Ursula Hassel's "*Ihr Frauen habt es nit leicht*. The Dramatization of Gender Issues In the Plays by Felix Mitterer." I will discuss each of these four articles in turn.

Brokoph-Mauch's piece provides an excellent introduction to both Besuchszeit

and Mitterer's writing style. She discusses Mitterer's ability to breathe life into old stereotypes, using local elements which enable the Tyrolese to develop empathy for the marginalized individuals whom he portrays. She analyzes Besuchszeit's themes, stressing both gender and generational conflicts, and discusses Sibirien briefly in association with "Abstellgleis." She then comments on Mitterer's use of realism to expose social problems, emphasizing the importance of language to demonstrate the problems arising from communication difficulties. Brokoph-Mauch notes that reviewers tend to praise Mitterer's portrayal of socially critical issues using "real" characters with whom people can empathize. She then briefly describes Mitterer's early life and his television works, finishing by stressing his wish to improve society by exposing its social mechanisms. Although well-written, this article does not address any of the topics at length, leaving much open to further investigation.

Schneider's article is not as thorough. He links the often appalling treatment of seniors to our own fear of mortality. Schneider analyzes the themes of Sibirien, emphasizing the aspects of the home which make it "a waiting chamber for death" (196): the dehumanization of the old man, which contributes to his deterioration; the emotional chill of the environment, which destroys hope; the lack of aid in maintaining a sense of dignity in the face of a gradual loss of physical control, and the emphasis on bribery to receive better treatment. He ends by observing that Mitterer's goal is to change our attitudes towards the elderly, which will benefit everyone because we all face the spectre

of old age. Although Schneider provides a good summary of the factors contributing to this "chamber of horrors," his article relies heavily upon quotations from the play rather than a discussion of his own views. This leaves us craving a more thorough analysis of each topic. As well, Schneider neglects to address the more sentimental aspects of the play's conclusion, using one of the few noteworthy lines in the final scene to praise it for its poetry.

In her brief discussion of "Verbrecherin," Schreckenberger focuses on the injustice of traditional gender roles and the destructiveness of relationships based on them. She concentrates on the oppressive and aggressive nature of the husband's dialogue, which she considers more dangerous than the stabbing. She also criticizes the social structures which share the burden of the woman's guilt, the legal system for focusing on the incident rather than its underlying causes, and the medical system for providing the woman with pills so that she endures her situation rather than confronts it. Schreckenberger concludes by emphasizing Mitterer's wish to show that a more equal partnership could spare suffering on both sides.

Hassel's paper addresses how dialogue reveals the causes of the woman's breakdown. Hassel demonstrates that any love which the woman may have felt for her husband was destroyed by the way he took her for granted. Yet this woman is so entangled in traditional gender roles that she blames herself for being unable to endure her sufferings. Hassel concludes by stressing the destructive nature of traditional gender

roles, noting that Mitterer wants his audience to acknowledge and change this situation.

Although both papers are good as far as they go, they do not stress the underlying communication problems between the couple. As well, neither author addresses the freedom which the woman feels in the prison, nor the manner in which this institution aids her healing process. Both articles also fail to discuss gender issues in other acts of Besuchszeit, although Hassel did mention "Man versteht nichts" because she quoted a line from it in her title. She, however, summarized the piece rather than discussed it.

Scholars had surprisingly few negative comments regarding Besuchszeit and Sibirien. Schneider, Schreckenberger and Hassel praised Mitterer's writing and themes. Brokoph-Mauch also approved, although she noted negative observations made by local reviewers. This included one opinion stating that because Besuchszeit deals with current events, changing social conditions will soon make it dated. Although unable to obtain this article, I disagree with this view because Mitterer addresses a more universal theme, society's treatment of the marginalized. Though the faces of these outsiders may change and their treatment may improve in some segments of the population, the underlying prejudices remain, waiting to erupt.

Brokoph-Mauch also noted that some reviewers criticized Mitterer's realism and claimed that his works rely on pity (127). I will examine some of these opinions later in this chapter. In an interview with Webb and Meyerhofer, Mitterer attributes negative reactions of this type to three reasons: he is "too common and popular;" his works are not

"artistic" enough, and he occasionally writes for television, a format which the critics feel "has nothing to do with [high] culture, with art" (30). But scholars did not seem to share this prejudice because they praised both his stage and his television works. They were not concerned with Mitterer's occasional tendency towards wordiness and sentimentality. Instead, they commended the plays for their social criticism and acknowledged both Mitterer's use of *Volksstück* traditions and his ability to connect with "ordinary" people. They recognized the relevance of his chosen topics: communication difficulties; gender and generational gaps; treating those who are different with humanity and dignity, and maintaining one's sense of identity. Still, there are few papers available on Besuchszeit and Sibirien. To obtain further critical opinions on these plays, I turned to the reactions of reviewers in Austria and other German-speaking lands. These views will be examined in the next section.

B. The Response to Performances of Besuchszeit and Sibirien in Austria

Local reviews of Besuchszeit and Sibirien have been mixed, although overall they tend to be positive. I examined twenty-two reviews of eleven productions of Besuchszeit between 1985 and 1992 and thirty reviews of ten productions of Sibirien between 1989 and 1994. I placed productions with more than one review first, discussing the single reviews together at the end of each section. The reviews cover a range of locations, as

well as presentations by both professional and amateur theatre groups, and are listed in the order in which they appear:

Besuchszeit

1. Vienna: Theater der Tribüne, Director Oskar Willner
Die Presse, Otto Hochreiter, 18.4.1985
Arbeiter Zeitung, Heinz Sichrovsky, 18.4.1985

2. Linzer Landestheater, Director Leopold Huber
Oberösterreichischer Nachrichten, Franz Schwabeneder, 19.12.1986.
Salzburger Nachrichten, Peter Kraft, 23.12.1986
Oberösterreichischer Nachrichten, Franz Schwabeneder, 23.12.1986

3. Vienna: Das Theater in der Josefstadt (Rabenhof), Director Dietmar Pfliegerl
Oberösterreichische Nachrichten, Ludwig Plakolb, 06.04.1990
Die Presse, Hans Haider, 05.04.1990
Vorarlberger Nachrichten, R.W., 05.04.1990
Die Furche, H.B., 12.04.1990
Salzburger Nachrichten, Helmut Schneider, 05.04.1990
Wiener Zeitung, Paul Wimmer, 05.04.1990
Falter, ed. Wolfgang Reiter and Roland Koberg, 13-19.04.1990
Kleine Zeitung, Frido Hütter, 05.04.1990
Neue Zürcher Zeitung, haj., 26.04.1990
Tiroler Tageszeitung, U. Strohal, 05.04.1990

4. Höttinger: Jugendbühne Innsbruck, Director Winfried Schatz
Tiroler Tageszeitung, i.t., 24.11.1987

5. Inntaler Volkstheater, Director Karl Schatz
Tiroler Tageszeitung, u.m., 10.05.1989

6. Volkstheatertagen am Grillhof bei Vill, Director unknown
Tiroler Tageszeitung, u.st., 12.03.1990

7. Tiroler Landestheater, Director Erich Innerebners

Tiroler Tageszeitung, Elisabeth Senn, 9/10.11.1995

8. Thaur: Theaterverein Thaur, Director Waltraud Hofmann
Tiroler Tageszeitung, u.st., 17-22.05.1989
9. Theater für Vorarlberg, Director Urs Bürgin
Vorarlberger Nachrichten, Christa Dietrich, 12.12.1989
10. Österreichischer Länderbühne, Director Renate Olarova
Wiener Zeitung, Lona Chernel, 03.03.1992
11. Graz: Theater für Vorarlberg, Director Urs Bürgin
Kleine Zeitung, Claudia Taucher, 06.05.1990

Sibirien

1. Telfs: Tiroler Volksschauspiel, Director Rudi Ladurner,
Actor Siegmund Bergelt
Der Standard, Michael Cerha, 04.08.1989 (preview)
Unknown newspaper, Christoph Hirschmann, Date unknown¹
Unknown newspaper, Elisabeth Senn, 10.08.1989
Neue Tiroler Zeitung, Jutta Höpfel, 08.08.1989
Salzburger Nachrichten, APA, 08.08.1989
Tiroler Tageszeitung, g.k., 08.08.1989
Salzburger Nachrichten, Wolfgang Höbel, 12/13.08.1989
2. Innsbruck: Tiroler Landestheater, Director Heinz Possberg,
Actor Volker Krystoph
präsent, Helmut L. Demel, 16.05.1991
Wiener Zeitung, Jutta Höpfel, 18.05.1991
Dolomiten, Elisabeth Senn, 25-26.05.1991
3. Vienna: Akademietheater, Director Franz Morak,
Actor Fritz Muliar
Volksstimme, Gerald Grassl, 23.10.1990
Wiener Zeitung, H. Haider-Pregler, 23.10.1990

¹In this, and other cases in which I am unable to provide dates or newspaper titles, the Innsbrucker Zeitungsarchiv did not provide the information with the articles which they sent.

Die Furche, Hellmut Butterweck, 25.10.1990
Die Presse, Duglore Pizzini, 22.10.1990
Vorarlberger Nachrichten, R.W., 24.10.1990
Salzburger Nachrichten, Helmut Schneider, 22.10.1990
Kleine Zeitung, Frido Hütter, 22.10.1990
Tiroler Tageszeitung, Maria Rennhofer, 22.10.1990
Die Welt, Karin Kathrein, 25.10.1990
Der Standard, Gerhard Kofler, 22.10.1990
Arbeiter Zeitung, Erich Demmer, 22.10.1990
Dolomiten, i.f., 27-28.10.1990
Stuttgarter Zeitung, Hellmut Butterweck, 31.10.1990
Oberösterreichische Nachrichten, Ludwig Plakolb, 22.10.1990

4. Salzburger Landestheater, Director and Actor Fritz Mular
Oberösterreichische Nachrichten, Ilse Retzek, 01.03.93
5. Unknown Location, Director unknown,
 Actor Peter Mitterutzner
Dolomiten, Ilse Thuile, 26.04.1994
6. Linzer Theaterkeller im Ursulinenhof, Director Bettina Rehm,
 Actor Heinz Filges
Oberösterreichische Nachrichten, Franz Schwabeneder, 25.10.1994
7. Graz: Grazer Thalia, Director Thomas Janßen,
 Actor Kurt Hradek
Kleine Zeitung, Werner Krause, 05.02.1993
8. Stadttheater Ingolstadt, Director Dietmar Zerwes,
 Actor Wendelin Starcke-Brauer
Vorarlberger Nachrichten, Edgar Schmidt, 23.01.1991
9. Südtiroler Ensemble-Theaters, Director Erich Innerebner,
 Actor Peter Mitterutzner
Tiroler Tageszeitung, E. Ausserer, 11.01.1990

I will examine these productions to see what reviewers consider the strengths and weaknesses of these plays in order to gain a better understanding of Mitterer's version of

the *Volksstück*.

i) Besuchszeit

I will begin with the contrasting views of Otto Hochreiter of Die Presse and Heinz Sichrovsky of the Arbeiter Zeitung regarding Besuchszeit's debut at the Theater der Tribüne in Vienna. Hochreiter, writing for the more prominent newspaper, considered Besuchszeit to be Mitterer's worst piece although he admitted that the play could succeed because "Mitterers Dramatik geht eben ans Herz." He did not approve of this use of emotional identification though, feeling that it resulted in "mehr Mitleid als Gestaltung." The result was a "Rührstück . . . [daß] so unbeholfen konstruiert ist, daß auch bemühte Schauspielerleistungen . . . [es] wenig verbessern können." Sichrovsky, in contrast, praised Mitterer's lack of artifice and his use of emotions rather than "Kunstgriffe und Verfremdungsgaukeleien." Sichrovsky commended Mitterer for his ability to overhear ordinary people, creating dialogues which demonstrate that the visitors are also held captive, imprisoned by the social pressures which make people into "Produktionsmaschinen."

The production by the Linzer Landestheater in December 1986 sparked two reviews as well as a brief explanation of the intentions of the director, Leopold Huber. Huber recognized the potential problem of and solution to Mitterer's realism: "Es ist hier

immer die Gefahr der Schnulze, man muß daher auch die Bösartigkeit der Figuren erkennen und spielen. Es ist eine Gratwanderung zwischen Realismus und Ironie." Peter Kraft of the Salzburger Nachrichten and Franz Schwabeneder of the Oberösterreichischer Nachrichten approved of the results. Schwabeneder praised Huber for not merely creating compassion for the characters, bringing them instead to the edge of caricature to demonstrate "die Versteinerung, das Renitente, das Bösartige." Kraft was pleased that Huber brought a certain "Linzer Fassung" to the text by criticizing local industries.² Both applauded Mitterer's use of language, Schwabeneder remarking that it reflected the characters' difficulties in articulating their thoughts. Although Kraft found "Weizen auf der Autobahn" to be wordy and sentimental, overall he considered Besuchszeit to be "Minimalkunst aus Alltagsdialogen, einem Sprachschatz von Andeutungen, Weglassungen und wie Kieselsteine abgeschliffenen Klischees und Mundartbrocken." Schwabeneder commented that the direct, critical nature of the play combined with its *Volksstück* qualities, "macht den Grat zwischen Betroffenheit und Sentimentalität, zwischen Realismus und Schnulze schmal."

In April 1990, Besuchszeit attracted attention because it was the first play to be performed at the Theater im Rabenhof in Vienna. I obtained ten reviews, three positive,

²"Der ihm verpflichtete junge Regisseur Leopold Huber hat das klar erkennen lassen, jedoch eine *Linzer Fassung* des Textes geschaffen, die - etwa im letzten Einakter - das Stück weiterdichtet. Da wird beispielsweise sehr handgreiflich die Situation der örtlichen Großindustrie beschworen." Peter Kraft, "Mitleid mit den Zermalmten," Salzburger Nachrichten 23 Dec. 1986.

three mixed and four negative. Ludwig Plakolb of the Oberösterreichische Nachrichten, Hans Haider of Die Presse, R.W. of the Vorarlberger Nachrichten, H.B. of Die Furche, and Helmut Schneider of the Salzburger Nachrichten all acknowledged Mitterer's interest in social issues. Plakolb remarked on the directness and the honesty of the play which contained "mehr Substanz denn Zielrichtung; enthält mehr Wahrheit und Wahrhaftigkeit denn Kalkül und Absicht." Haider, the most widely respected of these reviewers, admired Mitterer's strong female characters who maintained confidence and a fighting spirit while the men fell apart. R.W. was impressed by how Mitterer ensured we could also identify with the visitors who suffer "an Lebensleere und Ausweglosigkeit, an innerer Verwahrlosung."

But not all remarks were this positive. H.B. was unimpressed with the consistency of the acts, remarking that the "zwei nach wie vor wirken, als seien sie etwas schnell entstanden, um die zwei anderen aufzufüllen." Paul Wimmer of the Wiener Zeitung found "Man versteht nichts" to be weak and clichéd, describing the letters which opened each scene as an "Unbeholfenheit, die man bei Felix Mitterer sonst nicht gewohnt ist." Roland Koberg of Falter, Frido Hütter of the Kleine Zeitung and Schneider felt that Mitterer put too much information in each act. This affected the play's power, because "[d]er permanente Stimmungswechsel und die großen Ereignisse beeinträchtigen die Glaubwürdigkeit der Texte schwer" (Koberg). Koberg also agreed with haj, the reviewer for the prominent newspaper, the Neue Zürcher Zeitung, who stated that only the actors

could lift the evening "über die Banalität des Zufälligen."

Hütter deserves special mention for his extremely mixed review of Besuchszeit. He applauded Mitterer for the directness of his characters and his use of reality. Yet he considered this a weakness as well, resulting in "Anklagen ohne exzessive Konsequenz, Theater ohne Überzeichnung, Wirklichkeit ohne die Hyperrealität der Bühnenwelt." Interestingly, Hütter chose "Man versteht nichts," which Strohal, R.W. and Wimmer considered the weakest act, as the highpoint of the evening, praising Mitterer for portraying "schon nach wenigen Minuten soviel Einsicht und Emotion . . . daß andere Autoren daraus über Stunden hinweg zehren möchten." Yet he balanced this by concluding that "[z]uviel des Guten bedeutet auch zuwenig. Zuwenig Raum für das Theater im Kopf, in welchem der Zuseher den Hinweisen des Autors folgen kann." In the end, it was difficult to assess Hütter's position on the play.

The remaining commentaries on Besuchszeit are single reviews which I will consider together as a group. Interestingly, many of these took place on provincial stages, indicating that Mitterer's plays were popular with amateur groups. Two reviewers for the Tiroler Tageszeitung, i.t. (Jugendbühne Innsbruck), and u.m. (Inntaler Volksstheater), commented positively on amateur productions, while another reviewer for the Tiroler Tageszeitung, u.st (Volksstheaterfest am Grillhof bei Vill) found that the actors merely emphasized Mitterer's sentimental tendencies. On the whole, however, critics commended Mitterer's effective use of reality, his language, and his ability to enable us to identify

with his characters. Reviewing a production by the Tiroler Landestheater, Elisabeth Senn of the Tiroler Tageszeitung was impressed by Mitterer's sensitive use of dialogue and dialect to portray the fate of ordinary people. Although Senn criticized some scenes for being longwinded and lacking dramatic high points, she acknowledged that this resulted because Mitterer takes material directly from life. Reviewing a second production for the Tiroler Tageszeitung, u.st. (Thauer Laienspiel), found that this sense of reality contributes to Besuchszeit's immediacy, permitting everyone to understand Mitterer's characters and plots. He remarked that although the intellectual public might find this immediacy suspicious, the spectators at this production were deeply moved. Two other reviewers, Christa Dietrich of the Vorarlberger Nachrichten (Theater für Vorarlberg), and Lona Chernal of the Wiener Zeitung (Österreichische Länderbühne), looked at the understanding with which Mitterer portrayed his characters. Chernal found that he emphasized the narrow line dividing victim and perpetrator, while Dietrich commended him for demonstrating that both the visitors and the inmates are prisoners, incapable of freeing themselves from the bonds which their origins, upbringing, education and social position have placed on them.

The preceding reviews demonstrate that the reactions to Besuchszeit were primarily positive. But we must realize that this is one of Mitterer's later plays. The critics have become accustomed to his writing style and therefore do not respond as drastically

as they did to earlier pieces, such as Stigma. But they still have strong feelings regarding his strengths and weaknesses, views which I will evaluate in the next few pages.

Opinions have varied regarding Mitterer's writing technique. Many reviewers commented on strengths that I discussed in chapter 2: Strohol recognized Mitterer's ability to both build and destroy hope; Haider discussed the strong female characters; Sichrovsky and Dietrich commented on the sympathy created for both the inmates and the visitors, and Plakolb applauded Mitterer for avoiding black-and-white portrayals of the world. Many also praised Besuchszeit for its realism. (It should be noted that when I use terms such as "real," "realistic" or "realism" with regards to Mitterer's plays, I am not referring to the literary movement, Realism, which had more urban concerns. I mean Mitterer's ability to portray everyday life, its pain, people and concerns.) This has caused critics to describe him as a "Wirklichkeits-Chronist" (Krause) and a "poetische[r] Realist" (Haider). But not everyone agrees that this is a strength. Hütter, for example, felt that Mitterer's realism results in "Wirklichkeit ohne die Hyperrealität der Bühnenwelt." Ironically, many of the negative comments regarding Mitterer's realism appear to stem from his refusal to embrace the current postmodern theatre trends, which emphasize the subversion of accepted modes of thought and the fundamentals of language to reveal the "meaninglessness" of existence.³

Many critics, including Sichrovsky, Plakolb and Hütter, praised Mitterer's ability

³M. H. Abrams, "Modernism and Postmodernism," A Glossary of Literary Terms (Fort Worth: Holt, 1988) 109-110.

to permit us to identify with his characters emotionally. But this intense use of emotions has caused others, like Hochreiter, to accuse him of using "mehr Mitleid als Gestaltung," creating melodrama rather than true theatre. To decide if this is true, we must first consider what melodrama is. This type of play is characterized by a plot revolving around "malevolent intrigue and violent action, while credibility both of character and plot is sacrificed for violent effect and emotional opportunism."⁴ This implies a degree of sensationalism which I fail to see in Besuchszeit. It is true that Mitterer occasionally overemphasizes the tragedy of his plays. For example, in "Man versteht nichts," must the events occur at Christmas to increase the man's pain? The suffering caused by his lay-off, his wife's illness and her eventual death certainly suffices. Yet in such circumstances it is more appropriate to criticize Mitterer for relying on sentimentality. Critics, such as Schwabeneder, did comment on the narrow gap which exists in Besuchszeit between "Betroffenheit und Sentimentalität, zwischen Realismus und Schnulze." And many, such as Kraft, u.st. and most of the Vienna Rabenhof reviewers, found "Man versteht nichts" inferior because it was sentimental. But this sentimentality can not hide the fact that this act, which is often considered to be the weakest of the cycle, contains some strong points. Dietrich and Hütter both praised it, the former because it is an excellent depiction of the mutual dependency and silent suffering of the elderly couple, and the latter because of the emotional intensity which Mitterer quickly created. I agree that although "Man versteht

⁴ M. H. Abrams, "Melodrama," A Glossary of Literary Terms, 5th ed. (Fort Worth: Holt, 1988) 99-100.

nichts" can be construed as sentimental, it remains a superb study of human nature, depicting the deep emotional bonds existing between the elderly couple. Overall, I do not find that Mitterer's stress on emotional identification decreases the value of his works. It is true that contemporary authors, including those associated with the new socially critical *Volksstück*, often employ more Brechtian techniques, relying on a stylized or intellectual approach to alienate the audience. But Mitterer has chosen to approach provocative social themes largely by addressing feelings, which have a wider appeal than ideas, making his works more accessible to his intended audience.

Critics have also attacked Mitterer for being long-winded. R.W. observed that the elderly couple in "Man versteht nichts" "muß das Unrecht . . . ein wenig zu lange beplaudern." Others condemned Mitterer for overloading *Besuchszeit* with particulars which "beeinträchtigen die Glaubwürdigkeit der Texte schwer" (Koberg) and "stumpft die Aufnahmebereitschaft des Publikums ab" (Schneider). It is true that by attempting to present all of the conflicts, fears and concerns of his characters, Mitterer confronts us with an abundance of information. This is apparent towards the end of "Abstellgleis" when the old man complains about the indignities he suffers: the bed is too high, the rooms all look the same, he has little say regarding the decor, and so on. But I find that these details create a sense of urgency, emphasizing that the old man must share his complaints without delay because visits are infrequent and his daughter-in-law will soon be leaving. It also increases the likelihood that the viewer will identify with at least one of

the wrongs that the old man suffers.

Although there was a lack of consensus regarding Mitterer's writing techniques, critics tended to praise his use of language and dialogue. Sichrovsky admired Mitterer's ability to overhear ordinary people, creating dialogues which are effective "weil sie wahr sind . . . [o]hne dramaturgische Kunstgriffe und Verfremdungsgaukeleien." This lack of artifice helps Mitterer reach his intended audience, who might be unwilling to view a play containing more experimental language. But this apparent simplicity also impresses the critics because it conceals a "Minimalkunst aus Alltagsdialogen, einem Sprachschatz von Andeutungen, Weglassungen und wie Kieselsteine abgeschliffenen Klischees und Mundartbrocken" (Kraft).

On the whole, Besuchszeit appealed to the critics who agreed that in this play, Mitterer deals with relevant and powerful topics, using language in an effective fashion to create believable, human characters. They disagreed, however, as to whether his emphasis on reality, his writing style and his use of emotional identification were positive or negative traits. Interestingly enough, these are factors which are not popular in contemporary theatre and contribute to Mitterer's ability to appeal to the *Volk*. Could it be that some reviewers are unable to respect a piece which is both popular and does not conform to current dramaturgy? But whether critics liked Besuchszeit or not, they were forced to admit that Mitterer succeeded in reaching the audience, who applauded the play wildly in every case.

ii) Sibirien

I have thirty reviews of ten Austrian productions of Sibirien beginning with the play's premiere in Telfs at the Tiroler Volksschauspiel in August 1989. I obtained a preview and six reviews of the production, most of which were positive. Before Sibirien opened, Michael Cerha of Der Standard provided an overview of the play. Cerha felt that Mitterer did not address many of the larger social issues contributing to the treatment of the elderly, but he praised him for expressing the difficulties faced by those who are unable to articulate their problems. He stated that at his best, Mitterer is "ein Philosoph der Einfältigen im besten Sinn des Volkstheaters," but tempered this by acknowledging that at his weakest, Mitterer "wirkt . . . eher unbeholfen." He also commented on how the use of repetition in Sibirien linked it stylistically to Thomas Bernhard.

Overall, reviews of the debut were positive: Christoph Hirschmann of an unidentified newspaper observed that Sibirien was "voraussichtlich die Theatersensation dieser Saison." Elisabeth Senn, also of an unidentified newspaper, was impressed by Mitterer's use of repetition, which reminded her of Bernhard's style. But she noted that Mitterer finds "seiner eigenen Sprache, die nicht unbedingt mit originellen Bildern aufwartet, aber so klingt wie im richtigen Leben." Jutta Höpfel of the Neue Tiroler Zeitung, APA of the Salzburger Nachrichten and Senn all praised Mitterer's gripping realism, especially in light of the events at Lainz. But others criticized Mitterer's writing

technique. For example, g.k. of the Tiroler Tageszeitung observed that the play occasionally bordered on kitsch, citing the final scene as an example. Wolfgang Höbel of the Salzburger Nachrichten also found that the realism of Mitterer's writing made it "eher Journalismus als Theaterkunst."

In May 1991, a production by the Tiroler Landestheater in Innsbruck attracted three reviewers, Helmut Demel of präsent, Jutta Höpfel of the Wiener Zeitung and Elisabeth Senn of the Dolomiten. With the exception of Senn's remarks that Sibirien offered "keinen besonderen Höhepunkt, weder dramaturgisch, noch schauspielerisch," the reviewers praised both this piece and its author. They again remarked on the play's reality, Demel finding it disturbing because "niemand kann daran vorbeigehen, als ginge es ihn nichts an." Höpfel applauded the play for containing "kein falscher Ton . . . nur Wahrheit . . . [v]on Larmoyanz, von Sentimentalität keine Spur."

In October 1990, a production of Sibirien at the Akademietheater in Vienna attracted fourteen reviewers from across Austria and Germany. Gerald Grassl of the Volksstimme suggested that this was "[e]iner der atemberaubendsten Theaterabende in Wien während der vergangenen Jahre." Seven other reviewers agreed, while three had mixed views and three others had very negative ones.

The critics recognized that Mitterer's potent use of realism stressed the need for change. H. Haider-Pregler of the Wiener Zeitung, for example, considered Sibirien an everyday story that causes us to consider "einem kollektiv und individuell verdrängten

Problem" long after the curtain has fallen. But Mitterer was again criticized for his journalistic tendencies, as seen in the comment by Helmut Schneider of the Salzburger Nachrichten, who felt that "bei der Umsetzung vom journalistischen 'Aufgreifen' zum literarischen Gestalten patzt Mitterer oft recht deutlich." Others, including Maria Rennhofer of the Tiroler Tageszeitung and Duglore Pizzini of the respected paper, Die Presse, expressed the opinion that Mitterer relies on pathos, sentimentality and clichés. Pizzini stated that this ensures Mitterer's works do not fall into the category of higher literature. Karin Kathrein of Die Welt and Haider-Pregler were more positive. Kathrein described his work as "reichlich klischeehaft, aber in einer nicht uninteressanten Form." Haider-Pregler remarked that a play based so strongly on life is bound to contain clichés, and he stressed that the ones which Mitterer uses are "allgemeingültige . . . [f]ür sentimentale 'Senioren' - Romantik ist da kein Platz."

The remaining productions of Sibirien largely took place in major Austrian cities, unlike those of Besuchszeit, which often were performed on provincial stages. Many of the reviewers were positive about Mitterer's realism, including Ilse Retzek of the Oberösterreichische Nachrichten (Salzburger Landestheater), Ilse Thuile of the Dolomiten (unknown location), Franz Schwabeneder of the Oberösterreichische Nachrichten (Linzer Theaterkeller im Ursulinenhof), and Werner Krause of the Kleine Zeitung (Grazer Thalia). Krause considered Mitterer to be "ein begnadeter und gnadenloser Wirklichkeits-Chronist" and felt that Mitterer's "Gewissensbelästigungen

sind hochnotwendig." Schwabeneder harked back to Cerha and Senn in Telfs by remarking that the strongest parts of Sibirien remind one of Thomas Bernhard. On the negative side, Edgar Schmidt of the Vorarlberger Nachrichten (Stadttheater Ingolstadt), found Sibirien to be an "Ansammlung von Biertischklischees und Vorurteilen." While agreeing that Mitterer depicts realistic events, Schmidt observed that "ein Autor von Rang müßte eine solch zutiefst menschliche Problematik doch psychologisch differenzierter . . . und ohne Verallgemeinerung aufarbeiten."

As was the case with Besuchszeit, the overall reaction to Sibirien was positive, especially regarding Mitterer's use of realism to promote the need for social change. The scandal in Lainz had heightened public awareness as to the problems facing the elderly in public homes, making the play all the more disturbing. But this strong basis in reality was criticized as well, causing some to question whether or not Sibirien was "true" theatre. Höbel felt that Mitterer had created a piece which was "eher Journalismus als Theaterkunst," while Krause found it was "mehr eine Verfallsstudie als ein Theaterstück." Others condemned the play for its sentimental tendencies, Pizzini remarking that the play teetered on the edge of "Sozialschnulze," relying on "eine Manifestation des Mitleidens" rather than "die feingeschliffene Brillanz seines Textes." Grassl disagreed with these views, stating that Sibirien was an intense and intimate theatre experience. Haider-Pregler and Kofler agreed, calling Sibirien an "aufwühlendes Theaterereignis" and "ein kurzes, aber großes Stück moralischen Theaters" respectively. I find Mitterer's use of realism in

Sibirien quite disturbing, and agree with R.W.'s assessment that "Mitterer zeigt, wieviel Kraft in dieser Methode stecken kann." Mitterer does tend towards sentimentality, especially in the final scene when the old man bids the world farewell, but this does not detract from the fact that he has created a moving and thought-provoking portrayal of a man's powerlessness in the face of the unholy alliance between his family and the home. The resulting picture is quite distressing, promoting the need for change. This sense of social consciousness caused Cerha to remark that, at his finest, Mitterer is "ein Philosoph der Einfältigen im besten Sinn des Volkstheaters."

Like Besuchszeit, the language and dialogue used in Sibirien was consistently praised. But this play introduced a new issue. Schwabeneder stated that the repetitive and verbose nature of the monologue was reminiscent of Thomas Bernhard's "finsteren und zärtlichen Verzweiflungsarien," focusing attention on certain statements and increasing their power. Senn agreed, but noted that in doing so, Mitterer found "seiner eignen Sprache" which "klingt wie im richtigen Leben."

Reviewers also concentrated more on Mitterer's use of clichés. With the exception of Schmidt's observation that Sibirien is a collection of "Biertischklischees und Vorurteilen," the majority of the reviewers were supportive, recognizing that Mitterer employs clichés in an interesting fashion (Kathrein), and that he utilizes "allgemeingültige" ones based on life rather than romantic notions about seniors (Haider-Pregler). Clichés did not appear to detract from the overall effectiveness of the play,

because, as Höpfel noted, "Da ist kein falscher Ton im Spiel, nur Wahrheit." Mitterer demonstrates that "allgemeingültige" ideas can be effective if used to call attention to prevalent, but negative, views of society.

In Sibirien, Mitterer again conveyed his message to the reviewers, aided in this case by the events in Lainz. Most greeted the play enthusiastically, approving of Mitterer's use of language and clichés. Reactions to the realism of the piece were again mixed. But as with Besuchszeit, opposing critical views had little effect on the public's enthusiasm, for in each case the critics noted that the play was greeted with tremendous applause.

C) The International Response to Besuchszeit and Sibirien

I will not dwell on international reviews of these plays because my focus is the local reception. But I do wish to show how these two plays have been received outside of Austria to demonstrate why they are not merely provincial pieces. This subject warrants further study because Mitterer's works have been widely translated and performed in other countries. According to the Österreichischer Bühnenverlag Kaiser, Besuchszeit is available in English, Irish, French, Czech, Hungarian, Italian and Croatian. But Sibirien is Mitterer's most widely translated piece, appearing in Italian, Swedish, Danish, Hungarian,

Czech, Spanish, Croatian, English, French, Polish, Hebrew and Slovene.⁵ The two-volume collection of Mitterer's works, Stücke, contains pictures of productions of Besuchszeit in New York and Prague, as well as of a film version by the BBC in Welsh. As for Sibirien, the same collection includes pictures from productions in Göttingen, Nürnberg, Wiesbaden, Zurich, Bern and Budapest. I have also found articles referring to performances of these plays in New York, Hollywood, Budapest, Moscow and Santiago.⁶

In this section, I will examine five reviews of presentations of Besuchszeit in Munich and Wolkenstein, and ten regarding performances of Sibirien in Bonn, Munich, Frankfurt a.M. and Zurich. The productions and reviews are as follows:

Besuchszeit

1. Munich: Münchner Volkstheater, Director Michael Peter
Münchner Merkur, Achim Barth, 13.06.1988
Salzburger Nachrichten, Sibylle Steinkohl, 10.06.1988 (commentary on Peter)
Salzburger Nachrichten, Thomas Thieringer, 13.06.1988
Salzburger Nachrichten, H. Lehmann, 17.6.1988
2. Theaterverein Wolkenstein, Director Rudi Avi [performed in Ladino under the title,

⁵ Österreichischer Bühnenverlag Kaiser & Co., letter to Christine Gerhard, 1 April 1996.

⁶ Anonymous, "Mitterers Besuchszeit in New York," Vorarlberger Nachrichten 21 Feb. 1990; Anonymous, "Aufführung von Mitterers Sibirien in Budapest," Tiroler Tageszeitung 21 Nov. 1991; Anonymous, "Mitterer in Hollywood," Oberösterreichische Nachrichten 17 Sept. 1993; APA, "Sibirien in Moskau," Tiroler Tageszeitung 10 Mar. 1994. The final article also mentioned a production of Sibirien which was to open in Santiago, Chile, at the end of April that year.

Jënt sëula]Dolomiten, Im., 27.11.1990**Sibirien**

1. Bonn: Schauspiel Bonn, Director Ina-Kathrin Korffs
Actor Aljoscha Sebald
Neue Zürcher Zeitung, Günther Hennecke, 16.11.1989
Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Andreas Rossmann, 27.11.1989
2. Munich: Münchner Volkstheater, Director Rolf Stahl
Actor Otto Tausig
Stuttgarter Zeitung, Manfred Seiler, 20.04.1990
Münchner Merkur, Simone Dattenberger, 02.04.1990
Tiroler Tageszeitung, Karl-Robert Danler, 05.04.1990
Dolomiten, Hannes S. Macher, 07-08.04.1990
3. Frankfurt A.M.: Frankfurter Römer, Director and Actor Otto Tausig
Frankfurter Rundschau, kp., 22.11.1991
4. Zurich: Schauspielhauses Zürich, Director Peter Brogles
Actor Jürgen Cziesla
Tages Anzeiger, Isabell Teuwsen, 20.01.1992
Neue Zürcher Zeitung, vil., 21.01.1992
Weltwoche, Dorothee Hammerstein, 30.01.1992

i) Besuchszeit

Opinions regarding Besuchszeit's debut in Munich had a decidedly Austrian slant because only one of the reviewers was from Munich, Achim Barth of the Münchner Merker. Sibylle Steinkohl, Thomas Thieringer and H. Lehmann were all from the Salzburger Nachrichten. Before the play opened, Steinkohl interviewed the director,

Michael Peter, regarding the play. Like Leopold Huber, who directed the Linzer Landestheater's production of Besuchszeit discussed earlier, Peter recognized the difficulty of portraying Mitterer's realism without descending into sentimentality or reducing the play's message. But he offered no solutions, merely stating his goal: "[i]ch möchte nicht Aggressionen hervorufen, sondern Verständnis und Auseinandersetzung." He appeared to have succeeded, because both Barth and Thieringer approved of the production.

Thieringer emphasized Mitterer's ability to present the visitors as both victims and victimizers while Barth admired the directness of Mitterer's language, which was "niemals getrübt von Wort-artistischem Blabla, von gekünstelten pseudo-ästhetischen Garnituren, von dramaturgischen Mätzchen oder outriertem Insider-Geraune." He considered Mitterer's pieces to be "Heimatstücke im besten Sinne des Wortes," revealing damage to both the "Heimat" and its inhabitants.⁷ This, Barth observed, can be problematic for professional theatre groups, which lose the sense of "Heimat" within larger urban concerns. Lehmann's major criticisms were directed at "Man versteht nichts," which he deemed as "der letzte, längste und redseligste Einakter." He felt this was due to Mitterer's writing style which emphasized "biedere Palaver um Kochen, Waschen, Kündigung und kaum verstandene Gefühle," and noted that the tedious correspondence

⁷ Heimatstücke, as mentioned in chapter 1, are a type of *Volksstück* which obtained negative connotations under the National Socialists, who used them to promote nationalistic feelings. Barth is emphasizing that Mitterer has returned this category to its true roots: expressing concern about local situations.

opening the scenes did little to help.

The production by the Theaterverein Wolkenstein in Saxony, reviewed by Im of the Dolomiten, was unusual in that it was performed in the Ladin language. Im was impressed with Mitterer's ability to depict the underlying foulness of contemporary society, mentioning that although Mitterer was "bewußt an gewissen Stellen überzeichnet," this technique gave the play greater appeal. The translation may have increased the effect of the play because Im noted that many left the room "in stillem Schweigen, nachdenklich gestimmt von einem Spiel, das aufgerüttelt hatte," which differed from the usual wild applause greeting Mitterer's work.

ii) Sibirien

Sibirien's German debut at the Bonner Werkstatt-Bühne in November 1989 attracted comments by Günther Hennecke of the Neue Zürcher Zeitung and Andreas Rossmann of the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. Hennecke was impressed by the emotional chill dominating the play, and although he did not consider Sibirien a great piece of literature, he admitted that it was "zumal in dieser Präsentation, ein bitterer, nachdenklicher Abend." Rossmann felt that the best part of the play was its title, but thought that the metaphor could have been developed further. He was unimpressed by Mitterer's attempt to portray social problems, finding that the author relied too much on

pity.

The next German production was held at the Münchner Volkstheater in April 1990 and attracted both German and Austrian reviewers. This evening consisted of two monologues concerning the elderly, the first being Franz Xaver Kroetz' Weitere Aussichten, the second being Sibirien.⁸ Manfred Seiler of the Stuttgarter Zeitung remarked that although the two plays complemented each other, Mitterer's piece was more direct and humorous, albeit in a biting, ironical fashion. Both Simone Dattenberger of the Münchner Merkur and Karl-Robert Danler of the Tiroler Tageszeitung considered Sibirien to be the better play because "Mitterers Humanität berührt mehr" (Danler).

Mitterer's concern with social issues was also commented on. Hannes S. Macher of the Dolomiten found that the soulless mechanisms of the home aptly reflected the coldness of contemporary society, creating "[e]in Stück, das unter die Haut geht, eine Aufführung, die zum Nachdenken zwingt." Seiler felt that Mitterer's realism could offer a solution to what he considered the problem with current trends in theatre, noting "wie fremd dem Theater soziale Stoffe geworden sind, wie ungeschickt es mit Alltagsproblemen umzugehen weiß [da es] lebt im Moment von Stilisierungen . . . vom Entwurf, vom Fragment." Therefore, Seiler feels, "[m]an wird wieder neu anfangen

⁸ Kroetz' play deals with an elderly woman who "nie gelebt hat, immer gelebt worden ist." She is being forced to leave her apartment, where she has spent the last forty years, to enter a home. The play deals with her bitterness at having to leave the life she knows "weil sie nichts anderes gelernt hat als zurückzutreten." Manfred Seiler, Stuttgarter Zeitung 20 Apr. 1990.

müssen, denn lange lebt es davon nicht mehr."

The next production took place at the Römer in Frankfurt in November 1991. The reviewer for the Frankfurter Zeitung, kp, had little to say about the play, attacking instead the new director of the Kammerspiel for forcing the piece to be held in the Römer. kp obviously felt that Mitterer's work was well-known in Frankfurt because he stated that "[d]ie Leute hätten sich um die Karten gerissen, die Aufführungen wären auf Tage hinaus ausverkauft" — if the piece had been held in the Kammerspiel. He did raise an interesting point regarding Tausig's performance, stating that he "läßt sein Österreichertum nur dezent anklingen," thus demonstrating consideration towards those who might not understand a more "Austrian" approach and dialect.

I have three reviews of a production of the Schauspielhaus in Zurich in January 1992, the final presentation of Sibirien which I will examine. The production was attended by reviewers of all the major Zurich papers, Isabell Teuwsen of the Tages Anzeiger, vil. of the Neue Zürcher Zeitung and Dorothee Hammerstein of Weltwoche. Teuwsen approved of how the director shortened Mitterer's text, leaving out "die selbstverliebten Wiederholungen und Geschwätzigkeit." vil. criticized Mitterer's writing for being one-sided and for occasionally reading like something from a psychology textbook. Teuwsen and Hammerstein were unable to agree regarding the effect of Mitterer's realism. Teuwsen felt that the theatre could provide only a limited depiction of problem, while Hammerstein praised the play for being "eine wortgewaltige Anklage"

rather than "ein rührseliger Sozialreport." She observed how, with the help of repetition, pauses and rhythm, Mitterer created "eine ganz eigene, verdichtete Sprachgestalt . . . abgehoben von und doch immer in Hörweite der Alltagssprache." But she was unimpressed with the play's ending, noting how the old man is left "ins poetische Nirgendwo der Halluzination."

Certain patterns are again apparent in the above reviews. On the whole, the two plays were well-received, being praised for their socially critical message. Barth commended the acts in Besuchszeit for being "Heimatstücke im besten Sinne des Wortes," conveying Mitterer's concern about Austria and revealing how contemporary values can be damaging to both the "Heimat" and its inhabitants. Critics continued to question the level of sentimentality in Mitterer's works, with Besuchszeit's "Man versteht nichts" again receiving the brunt of this criticism. Lehmann declared that the letters which began each scene contributed to the trivial and tedious nature of this act, which consisted of barely understood feelings and "biedere Palaver" on everyday topics. Both Thieringer and Lehmann also agreed that this act was both sentimental and tedious, although their opinions conflicted as to whether this was due to the acting or Mitterer's writing style. Views on Sibirien ranged from Hammerstein's that the play was not sentimental, to Rossmann's that Mitterer relied too much on pity. The latter comment reflects my view on the final act of that play. But although I agree that Mitterer

occasionally overindulges in emotions, I find that this has little effect on the overall power of his message.

Reviewers again acknowledged the vitality of Mitterer's language and dialogues. Thieringer admired how the conversations in Besuchszeit created sympathy for the characters by bringing "aus ihrer Sprachlosigkeit ihren weichen Kern heraus." Hammerstein commended Mitterer for his use of repetition, pauses and rhythm in Sibirien to create "eine ganz eigene, verdichtete Sprachgestalt" resembling everyday speech. In contrast, Teuwsen appeared relieved when the director shortened the text dramatically, removing much of the play's "selbstverliebten Wiederholungen und Geschwätzigkeit." But she neglected to consider that Mitterer had a purpose in writing the play in this manner. As discussed in the previous section, this is reminiscent of Bernhard's technique, drawing attention to key phrases and increasing their power.

In Munich, the decision to perform Sibirien with Kroetz' Weitere Aussichten provided an opportunity to contrast the works of two contemporary *Volksstück* authors. Although Seiler found that the plays complemented each other, many considered Mitterer's play more powerful. Comments ranged from how Sibirien was the "viel kraftvolleren Stück" (Dattenberger) to how "Mitterers Humanität berührt mehr" (Danler). I found it interesting how in this case, Kroetz' approach to the "new socially critical *Volksstück*" was not looked on as favourably as Mitterer's. In fact, the critics appeared to be taken with the human aspects of Mitterer's plays, which reflects my conclusions

regarding the power of Mitterer's humanity.

The reactions of reviewers outside of Austria is thus similar to that within his own country. Mitterer was praised for his use of language, dialogue, and socially critical themes. Typically, the most biting criticism was directed at the structure of his plays and his writing style. Charges of sentimentality were also raised, with critics alternating between attributing the cause to the writing or the acting. A new factor which arose included keeping the "Austrianness" of the play in check to make the contents of the piece more important than the location in which it occurred. As well, the comparison between Kroetz' and Mitterer's plays was interesting, reflecting my ideas regarding the humanity of Mitterer's *Volksstücke*. That Besuchszeit and Sibirien were greeted favourably by both critics and audiences outside of Austria demonstrates his wide appeal which has taken the *Volksstück* beyond the realms of provincial literature.

As demonstrated in this chapter, the overall critical reaction to Besuchszeit and Sibirien by scholars and both local and international reviewers was good. Although few in number, the scholars responded extremely well. My views of Mitterer's work were reflected in their recognition of the relevance of the themes which Mitterer addressed, focusing on the dehumanizing effects of old age homes (Schneider), problems resulting from traditional gender roles (Schreckenberger, Hassel and Brokoph-Mauch) and generational conflicts (Brokoph-Mauch). They did not focus on the more negative aspects

of Mitterer's works to the extent that the reviewers did, who were, after all, not reading the plays but seeing them performed. On the whole, therefore, Mitterer did not appear to have alienated the scholarly audience despite his tendency to utilize elements, such as sentimentality and realism, which are not always looked kindly upon in contemporary theatre.

The local reviewers provided a new body of evidence to which I could refer in order to gain a better understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of Mitterer's version of the *Volksstück*. Overall, these critics were also positive, especially regarding Mitterer's use of language and dialogue. Their comments have caused me to modify my assessment to include not just the directness of Mitterer's themes but also the directness of his language as a factor contributing to his appeal. With regards to Besuchszeit, critics such as Thieringer (Munich), Kraft (Linzer Landestheater), and Sichrovsky all provided flowery praise of Mitterer's direct language, commending his lack of "dramaturgische Kunstgriffe und Verfremdungsgaukeleien" (Sichrovsky). His language was also praised in Sibirien, but for different reasons. A number of critics, including Senn, Cerha, and Schwabeneder linked Mitterer's use of repetition in this play to the works of Bernhard, demonstrating another link with high literature.

I also found myself needing to reassess my opinions regarding Mitterer's use of clichés. I would normally assess this like Schmidt, who dismissed Sibirien as a mere collection of "Biertischklischees." But Kathrein and Haider-Pregler provided some

interesting commentary which lent a far more positive note to the use of this element. The former found that Mitterer makes use of interesting clichés, and the latter commented that he employs general ones which appear in real life, and help call to mind the more negative aspects of society, therefore stressing social misery. In light of the overall power of Mitterer's message in this play, I must agree.

The majority of the reviewers reflected my views about the strengths and weaknesses of Mitterer's works. Many reaffirmed my opinion on the importance of the clarity with which Mitterer presents relevant, realistic themes as well as of the more human aspects of his plays. They noted that the sympathy with which he depicts his characters, and the skill with which he can portray their problems, have led to him being described as a "poetischer Realist" (Haider). Reviewers, such as Höpfel, also acknowledged the hard-hitting nature of Mitterer's themes. She indicated that the true horror of Sibirien lies in the fact that "morgen können wir selbst die Entmündigten im Gitterbett sein." Others confirmed my views on the relevance of his topics by linking Sibirien to the Lainz scandal. Still others, such as Dattenberger, affirmed my evaluation of the socially critical aspect of Mitterer's work when recommending that Sibirien be mandatory viewing for "Sozialminister- und referenten, Heimleiter, Krankenhausträger und besonders diejenigen, die glauben, nie alt zu werden."

But other reviewers were quite adamant about Mitterer's weaknesses, forcing me to admit that there is a negative potential to Mitterer's realism. I began to recognize the

aspects of his writing which could cause critics to state that Besuchszeit and Sibirien are not "true" theatre: his direct approach which lacks the more stylized aspects of contemporary theatre; his tendency towards sentimentality, and his attention to detail. This has resulted in comments ranging from Hütter's remark that Mitterer's works lack the "Hyperrealität" of the stage, to Pizzini's that the plays border on "Socialschulze," to statements by Krause and Höbel, respectively, who found that Mitterer's plays consisted more of "Verfallsstudie" or "Journalismus" than good theatre. As discussed earlier in this chapter, I was unable to condemn Mitterer to the extent that many reviewers did, even regarding the impact of sentimentality on his works. But the highly negative comments regarding Mitterer's use of realism and sentimentality caused me to consider why opinions were so divided regarding these matters. I have come to the conclusion that many negative comments may have resulted from considering Mitterer's works in the light of more Brechtian traditions — traditions, which, in fact, had no influence on his writing. But Seiler's observation about contemporary theatre, "wie ungeschickt es mit Alltagsproblemen umzugehen weiß," demonstrates that some reviewers also find weaknesses in the modern approach.

After considering the various viewpoints, I have modified my views to acknowledge that strictly speaking, Mitterer's works are not high literature. But as I demonstrated in chapter 2, his plays do contain artistic merit in his socially critical themes as well as the modifications he has made to the *Volksstück*. Mitterer's plays are

therefore not merely popular literature. Mitterer has achieved a delicate balancing act between the two categories, which could perhaps account for the wide range of people to whom these works appeal. I will discuss Mitterer's unique combination of the artistic and the mundane further in the next and final chapter.

IV. HUMANIZING THE SOCIALLY CRITICAL *VOLKSSTÜCK*

Throughout the course of this thesis, I have shown how Mitterer has modified both the traditional and the socially critical forms of the *Volksstück*. But questions still remain regarding how he has come to terms with the genre as well as to how this relates to the paradoxes inherent to Besuchszeit and Sibirien. Here are two plays which utilize traditional *Volksstück* elements, albeit in a modified form, yet contain a message which should place them within the bounds of the new socially critical *Volksstück*. But unlike many works associated with this branch of the genre, Besuchszeit and Sibirien reach out to the *Volksstück*'s intended audience, the ordinary people. People outside of Tyrol can also relate to these plays, suggesting that Mitterer's works are not merely provincial pieces as the term *Volksstück* might imply. The issue becomes even more confusing when we recall that, as indicated in chapter 1, Mitterer does not consider his works *Volksstücke* because he feels this term promotes a demeaning attitude towards the audience of this genre. So how does one classify him in light of these paradoxes?

I began considering this in chapter 2, in which I demonstrated that, thematically, Mitterer takes an approach with which everyone can identify, "ob im Wiener Gemeindebautheater, am Mieminger Plateau oder im amerikanischen Schmelztiegel" (Strohal). This was confirmed in chapter 3 when I noted that Besuchszeit and Sibirien

have been widely translated and performed, and that these plays were applauded loudly at the productions which I examined both inside and outside of Austria. But how does Mitterer accomplish this? He begins by aiming his message at the ordinary people of Tyrol. His roots in a Tyrolean farming community give him an intimate knowledge of the inhabitants of this area in direct contrast to many other authors of the socially critical *Volksstück* who portray the *Volk* as they perceive them to be rather than what they actually are.¹ But Mitterer knows and respects these people and does not talk down to them, believing that they can accept more challenging material when it is presented in a compelling fashion.² He does so in Besuchszeit and Sibirien by employing elements found in the traditional *Volksstück* with which these people can identify. But these plays have moved beyond the limits of this genre. Although his characters could be of rural origin, the plays do not occur in a rural setting. Instead, they take place in institutions, a setting more typical of the city environment. This is an interesting approach, implying how both the rural existence and the *Volksstück* are changing with the gradual

¹ Jones mentions that Kroetz' Stallerhof was reaching an upper-middle class audience rather than the *Volk* whom it portrayed. He cites Herbert Gamper, who said that Horváth and his followers, such as Kroetz, "portrayed the condition of a certain segment of the people as they perceived it to be, rather than through their eyes, a procedure that resulted in a form of theatre that was about the *Volk*, rather than of or for them." In Calvin N. Jones, Negation and Utopia: The German Volksstück from Raimund to Kroetz (New York: Lang 1993) 219-220.

²As stated previously in chapter 1, Mitterer remarks "Naturally, wenn man ihnen die leichte Unterhaltung vorsetzt, dann nehmen sie die leichte Unterhaltung. Aber wenn man ihnen was Schwierigeres gibt, nehmen sie das auch. Nur, glaube ich, darf es nicht langweilig sein" (Hassel and Herzmann 22).

encroachment of more urban concerns.

In chapter 2, I also established that Mitterer avoids limiting himself to the rural themes one might expect from a *Volksstück* author. Instead, he employs everyday situations, such as problems in communication, conflicts arising from traditional gender roles, the often insensitive approach of those who promote unrestrained progress, and the inhuman nature of institutions: situations which are relevant to us all. The circumstances which he portrays are disturbing because we can recognize aspects of them in our own lives. The plays therefore do not need to be violent or surreal, like the works of many socially critical authors, to hit home.

This broad approach is not limited to Mitterer's plays; he also applies it to the other media in which he works. In the forward to a popular four-part television series which he created, Die Piefke-Saga, Mitterer specified that his goal was not just to show "wie sich 'typisch' deutsche Urlauber im Ausland aufführen . . . [i]ch hätte genausogut eine Wiener Familie in Caorle, eine Innsbrucker Familie am Gardasee zeigen können; die Mechanismen sind immer die gleichen." He then stressed that the importance of the story was not the people or the place in which it occurred, but that "[e]s geht um den Massentourismus."³

In chapter 2, I also illustrated how the appeal of Mitterer's message is not merely

³Felix Mitterer, foreword, "Die Piefke-Saga: Komödie einer vergeblichen Zuneigung," by Felix Mitterer, Sept. 1991, (Online Book Store (OBS), 1995). <http://www.obs-europa.de/obs/english/fbf/mitt/intro.htm>

based on the universal nature of his themes. He increases the impact of his words through the skill with which he shapes the speech of his characters, creating a sympathetic portrayal of the problems they experience. Through his combination of emotional identification and gripping themes, he is able to pull the people of Tyrol into his stories, despite the fact that he goes against the expectations of the traditional *Volksstück*. But this combination appeals to a broader audience as well. Mitterer's plays point out the underlying problems of society in a very human fashion, acting as a guide to what people everywhere must work together to improve. He offers no solutions in his pieces, because life rarely provides simple ones. Yet he hopes to make us realize "daß man was machen muß, daß man sich solidarisieren muß, weil sich sonst nie etwas verändert in der Gesellschaft" (Hassel and McMahon 27).

In chapter 2, I also showed how Besuchszeit and Sibirien differ from the norm structurally. Besuchszeit, the earlier of the two pieces, remains closer to the *Volksstück* tradition with its use of dialect, dialogue, and conflicts between conventional characters. It was also intended for a more traditional audience, for as Brokoph-Mauch observes, Besuchszeit is not for "den großen Staatsbühnen, das Mekka der Intellektuellen und Bürger," but rather for those who live in the environment in which Mitterer was raised (162). That he succeeded in reaching these people was shown when I examined local reviews in chapter 3, because Besuchszeit was often performed on more provincial stages. Mitterer has also distanced this play from the traditional genre by manipulating conventional elements and by creating a piece that consists of four separate stories bound

by a common theme.

Sibirien, on the other hand, has been altered to such a degree that its *Volksstück* origins are barely recognizable unless one is aware of its roots in Besuchszeit. In this play, Mitterer has grown artistically, experimenting with a more literary style. Instead of regional dialect, he employs High German in an effort to open the play to a larger audience. He uses modern dramatic techniques such as a stylized monologue in the form of free verse to echo the changing pitch of the old man's emotions. He also utilizes repetition and rhythm in such a fashion as to evoke comparisons with Bernhard. This comparison with one of the great contemporary Austrian authors is especially important. It demonstrates that Mitterer has successfully employed a modern dramatic technique, rather than just using repetition and rhythm for their own sake. This, in turn, indicates how he has further departed from the banalities of the traditional *Volksstück*. These links with "high" literature were often praised by reviewers. The fact that all productions of Sibirien were also received enthusiastically by the viewers suggests that in growing artistically, Mitterer is not alienating his audience.

In chapter 3, the majority of the reviewers reflected my observations that the realism, immediacy and relevance of Mitterer's topics contribute to both his popularity and the power of his works. Yet in reading their reviews, I learned of another factor which augments Mitterer's popularity — his use of language. This appeared to be divided into three major categories. The first was seen in Besuchszeit, in which the reviewers commented on how his dialogues were a "Minimalkunst aus Alltagsdialogen." This

simple, direct approach enables Mitterer to connect with his intended audience.⁴ The second involved his lyrical use of dramatic monologue and free verse in *Sibirien*, an experimental aspect which pleased critics. The third was his Bernhardesque use of repetition which increases his ties with "high" art. These comments caused me to reflect on my list of Mitterer's strengths, and add language to the elements which contribute to his appeal.

These modifications to both the traditional and the socially critical forms of the *Volksstück* indicate that Mitterer's works are not merely popular literature or provincial soap operas, despite the accusations of some critics who, as seen in chapter 3, state that he relies on melodrama, clichés, and sentimentality. Haider, who observed that "[z]wischen dem Billigrealismus des kleinen Fernsehfilms und Mitterers sich bisweilen komisch verkaufender Poesie klafft oft nur eine Handbreit," may have put his finger on an aspect of Mitterer's plays which makes them truly different. He explores the lines dividing art and popular culture, achieving an unusual combination of the refined and the mundane. Herzmann also recognized the fine line which Mitterer treads, indicating that he is:

[p]erhaps the only playwright who has achieved the right balance [between tradition and innovation] . . . He has on the one hand provoked a good number of public outcries, scandals and controversies which clearly prove that he does not simply give the audience what i[t] wants; on the other hand he has over the years achieved a degree of popularity in his native Tyrol for which other playwrights can only envy him. (Herzmann II 45)

⁴Heinz Sichrovsky, "Die Kunst des Hineinhorchens," *Arbeiter Zeitung* 18 Apr. 1985.

This could account for Mitterer's wide appeal: critics can admire his use of modern theatre techniques, such as monologue and free verse; ordinary people can admire the more "popular" aspects of his plays, such as the use of emotional identification and realism, and everyone can identify with the relevance of his socially critical messages.

This willingness to experiment with crossing boundaries is not limited to Besuchszeit and Sibirien. For example, in Munde Mitterer decided that it was not enough to set the story on a mountain: initial performances were actually held on the peak of that name because "[e]inmal im Leb'n muaß ma so was mach'n."⁵ This sense of exploration is also carried over into his television work. In the previously mentioned foreword to Die Piefke-Saga, Mitterer explains how he discovered a method which both probed accepted boundaries and avoided accusations of sentimentality:

Daß ich die Geschichte in Form einer Komödie schrieb, hat mich vor Larmoyanz geschützt, auch habe ich versucht, im Genre des — manchmal schon etwas faden — Fernsehspiels etwas Neues auszuprobieren, nämlich — völlig wider die dramaturgischen Regeln — die Uneinheitlichkeit. Der erste Teil ist eine Satire, der zweite Teil eine Komödie, der dritte Teil eine Tragikomödie, der vierte Teil eine Horrervision zum Totlachen.

This series appeared on NDR/ORF between 1989 and 1992 and was greeted enthusiastically by television viewers. Mitterer stated that "when it was being shown on television, it was *the* topic of conversation all over Austria, in every village and on every ski slope" (Meyerhofer and Webb 27). This is consistent with audience response to his

⁵Wolfgang Lechner and Thomas Mayfried, "Was wir uns antun," Zeitmagazin Feb. 1991: 19-21.

plays as well, for even negative reviews have had little effect on the attendance of his plays. He mentions that his production of Ein Jedermann in the Josefstadt Theatre in Vienna "experienced the worst reviews of my life, and still there were seventy sold-out performances" (Meyerhofer and Webb 31).

Where, however, does this place Mitterer in terms of the *Volksstück*? In answering this, I will return to Brecht's "Anmerkungen zum Volksstück" which I mentioned in chapter 1. Brecht felt that there was "ein Bedürfnis nach naivem, aber nicht primitiven, poetischem, aber nicht romantischem, wirklichkeitsnahem, aber nicht tagespolitischem Theater" (141). Later in this piece, he expanded on his ideas regarding the true potential of the genre:

Mit den obigen Ausführungen ist nicht mehr beabsichtigt als ein Hinweis darauf, daß auch für das neue Volksstück der Ruf nach einer neuen realistischen Kunst erhoben werden muß. Das Volksstück ist eine lange verachtete und dem Dilettantismus oder der Routine überlassene Gattung. Es ist an der Zeit, ihr das hohe Ziel zu stecken, zu dem ihre Benennung diese Gattung eigentlich von vornherein verpflichtet. (149)

Although it is obvious that Brecht would never have approved of Mitterer's plays because of their emphasis on empathy rather than alienation, Besuchszeit and Sibirien do reflect one of Brecht's ideas regarding the ideal *Volksstück* — they are "einer neuen realistischen Kunst." But Mitterer has accomplished his version of this independent of Brecht or any other theorists. He was blissfully unaware of Brecht's "Anmerkungen zum Volksstück," of Brecht's *Volksstück* Herr Puntila und sein Knecht Matti, and of Brechtian theatre techniques in general when he began writing. Mitterer had his own vision of what he

wished to convey and wrote accordingly. Brecht's views on the theatre have influenced the critics more than Mitterer. It is they who often criticize Mitterer's use of realism and empathy, looking at him in terms of what they consider "good" theatre rather than in terms of his own merit.

But as seen in chapter 3, many others have acknowledged Mitterer's contributions to the *Volksstück*, commenting that he "wirkt wie kaum ein anderer Schriftsteller mitleidend, anklagend und gesellschaftsverändernd" (Demel), and that there are "wenige Schriftsteller heute der unmittelbaren Wirklichkeit des Lebens, dort, wo es am elendsten ist, so nahe kommen wie er" (RW). Regarding Sibirien, Plakolb observed that Mitterer differs from his colleagues who "steigen entweder auf in gleichnishaft ästhetische Höhen . . . oder suhlen in morastigen Niederungen," focusing instead on creating detailed individuals who demonstrate "kein großes Schicksal, aber ein ganz persönliches." As to Besuchszeit, Plakolb noted that although Mitterer lacks the artistic knack of Handke, Turrini or Bernhard, he deserves recognition for what he does best: writing about those who have no place in the world. The end result, as R.W. put so aptly, is "ein Dramatikertalent, wie es nur wenige gibt."

Since his initial *Volksstück*, Kein Platz für Idioten (1977), Mitterer has written a number of plays which have been placed within this category. I dealt with two of his more recent *Volksstücke*, Besuchszeit (1985) and Sibirien (1989) to show how he has managed to address powerful themes, yet create a more realistic and human version of this genre. His most recent *Volksstück*, Abraham (1993), again addresses a gripping, relevant topic,

which would not usually be dealt with in a traditional *Volksstück*, the treatment of a young homosexual in a village in Tyrol. Mitterer has also turned increasingly to television productions, such as his four-part fictional series on the problems of tourism in Austria, Die Piefke-Saga, mentioned previously. Other recent works have included Das Fest der Krokodile (1994), a children's play, and Krach im Hause Gottes (1994), a *Mysterienspiel*. As is typical of Mitterer's works, these plays have received mixed reviews. There is little information available on Mitterer's current work because in the summer of 1995, he went into retreat in Ireland where he is presently staying with his family to find some time for himself and to work in peace. So far, his wish has been respected.⁶ In the last interview with Mitterer that I was able to locate, he expressed his interest in finishing a children's book he had begun writing with his daughter, Anna.⁷

Throughout this thesis I have established how Mitterer has modified both the traditional and the socially critical *Volksstück*, a topic which has hardly been discussed in the scholarly literature. I found that he portrays the commonplace in a realistic and relevant fashion, creating "scharf bissige Sozialkritik" which has made some refer to him as "das Gewissen der Gesellschaft."⁸ He understands the ordinary people about whom he

⁶"Felix Mitterer jenseits der Grenze," Tiroler Tageszeitung 16 Sept. 1995.

⁷Ludwig Heinrich, "Der Autor und das Korsett," Kleine Zeitung 4 Sept. 1994.

⁸These quotations are from the following reviews respectively: Ilse Retzek, "Die harmlose Variante," Oberösterreichische Nachrichten 1 Mar. 1993; Duglore Pizzini, "Der Menschheit ganzer Jammer," Die Presse 22 Oct. 1990.

writes, creating everyday, human characters who use simple and direct language. His plays have the ability to make people consider the more negative aspects of the social mechanisms which surround them in order to influence them to change these circumstances for the better. His success is evident in comments like that by Im, who observed how Besuchszeit moved the audience in Sëlva/Wolkenstein to such an extent that some left the room "in stillem Schweigen, nachdenklich gestimmt von einem Spiel, das aufgerüttelt hatte."

Mitterer provokes reactions such as these through his unique balance of the artistic and the popular, which is by no means in keeping with Brecht's designs for the *Volksstück* but does have its own merit. The paradoxes inherent to Besuchszeit and Sibirien have resulted because he was unconcerned with adhering to the traditional approach to the language, characters, humour, music, and happy endings of the *Volksstück*. This experimental aspect of Mitterer's style ensures that his plays are placed within the category of the new socially critical *Volksstück*. But he has created a more popular and human version of this type of *Volksstück*, which has ensured that his plays are not merely provincial pieces: the realism and relevance of his themes transcends the barriers of language and culture, endowing them with a more universal appeal. The excellent audience response to Besuchszeit and Sibirien in Austria and other German-speaking countries, combined with the fact that these plays have been translated into many languages, performed in a variety of venues, and attracted positive responses from reviewers writing for major newspapers across Austria, Germany and Switzerland,

indicate that he has succeeded in his unique approach.

Mitterer was too modest when stating his goals: "ich möchte . . . den Menschen eine Geschichte erzählen, die sie berührt und *vielleicht* zum Nachdenken anregt [my italics]" (Hassel and McMahon 24). There is no "vielleicht" about it: Mitterer has given his first audience, the people of Tyrol, and many other audiences around the world, a powerful message to consider. He has not been disheartened by those who feel that theatre must be radical, symbolic, and comprehensible only to the educated. These individuals might easily overlook the elegance of his simplicity. Instead, he has focused on communicating his message of the need for social change in his own manner, emphasizing a realistic approach to the theatre and the need for human characters with whom one can identify. This has created a more human approach to the new, socially critical *Volksstück*. Many have recognized the power and the beauty of his works and have been moved by his message. It is these people who will continue to make Mitterer one of the most performed living Austrian or German playwrights in the world. Perhaps he will never be acknowledged as a major author, but he has struck a chord in the ordinary people, the directors, the actors and the majority of the reviewers and scholars who will keep his works alive for some time to come. And no matter what he chooses to write, he will no doubt maintain his critical, yet human, approach to promoting the need for social change.

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