

CHAPTER 15

STAND BY YOUR MAN

(SELF-)REPRESENTATIONS OF SS WIVES AFTER 1945

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The performance piece *The Woman at His Side: Careers, Crimes, and Female Complicity under National Socialism*, written and performed by the German actors Inga Dietrich, Joanne Gläsel, and Sabine Werner, explores the degree to which the wives of SS officers were implicated in National Socialist politics and crimes. Commissioned by the Haus der Wannseekonferenz, the piece premiered there in 2001 and has since been performed about forty times in more than thirty locations around Germany, including concentration camp memorials and other sites of Holocaust memory, theaters, schools, cultural centers, and academic conferences. In January 2007, a radio version was produced, directed by the American writer David Zane Mairowitz, which was broadcast in 2008 by the Norddeutscher Rundfunk and rebroadcast in 2015 by the Westdeutscher Rundfunk. In September 2016, *The Woman at His Side* saw its English-language debut at Utrecht University in the Netherlands.

The piece, which draws on Gudrun Schwarz's groundbreaking 1997 study *Eine Frau an seiner Seite*, is minimalist and highly self-reflexive in its staging and documentary in its approach: the script consists

entirely of quotations taken from original sources. Ego-documents such as autobiographies, letters, and diaries but also other materials such as newspaper reports, legal documents, political speeches, and songs are arranged in such a manner that a narrative arc unfolds. The audience follows some of the most notorious “Nazi wives” such as Lina Heydrich, Ruth Kalder-Göth, Thea Stangl, Hedwig Höss, Irene Mengele, and Fanny Fritsch, as well as lesser-known women such as Eva Mennecke, from when they first met the men who would become their husbands, through courtship, engagement, and marriage. While their husbands organized the murder of the Jews, worked as concentration camp commanders, or selected patients for the “euthanasia” program, their wives fulfilled their duties as mothers and kept the household running. They were often well informed about the persecutory policies and plans of the Nazi regime. Many visited or lived with their husbands in or near the ghettos and concentration camps where they were stationed. There they profited from the persecutions by employing camp prisoners in their households and by enriching themselves with seized goods. Many actively supported their husbands’ careers and helped them escape at the end of the war.¹

The Woman at His Side is a meditation on guilt, complicity, responsibility, and representation. Given their intimate association with Nazi crimes, we would classify these women as perpetrators or, at the very least, accomplices. Nevertheless, this was not how they were seen after the end of the war. Most of them never faced legal prosecution, and postwar historical and cultural discourse construed them as innocent victims of or bystanders to Nazi crimes. Furthermore, the women themselves successfully exploited this idea in interviews and, in some cases, memoirs. The ambiguous status of these women in the discourse on the Holocaust is an illuminating example of the indeterminacy and fluidity of the categories of perpetrator and bystander, and, more importantly, of the strategic value of such categories within the discourse.

In this chapter, I will take the SS wives as a limit case for the construction and instrumentalization of the category of the bystander. To be clear: I am not suggesting that these women are or should be considered bystanders—on the contrary, by any reasonable definition they are perpetrators. Nevertheless, it has evidently been possible for them *to be cast* as bystanders, either by others or by themselves. What interests me is precisely how and why this was possible and what this reveals about the category of the bystander as such. “Bystander” is not a static a priori category but rather a discursive one that always entails a strategic or performative element. It is a label that is often applied only retroactively, often entirely divorced from historical facts and thus

intrinsically unverifiable. Furthermore, as we shall see, it is this performative aspect that *The Woman at His Side* mobilizes and renders visible. As said, the performance consists almost entirely of statements by the SS wives. Minimal historical commentary provides context but never an interpretation or a judgment. This absence of explicit moralistic didacticism makes the piece valuable from an educational standpoint: precisely because it does not close on a single verdict, it leaves it up to the audience to form an opinion on these women and encounter them as human beings with hopes, desires, and fears.

In this way, *The Woman at His Side* can be seen as an example of practice-based research. The three actors do not merely read the texts aloud; they enliven them with gestures, movements, and facial expressions. At strategic moments, they play music or other sound recordings from the time (such as a speech by Heinrich Himmler). They do not, however, aim at a mimetic representation: they never imitate the voices of the historical persons, and they do not wear costumes. They always remain actors, firmly anchored in the present, exhibiting the words of these women. There are other distancing devices that minimize any auratic quality, such as the deliberately low-tech tape recorder they use to play the songs, the absence of dramatic light effects, and the laying open of all sources. Each passage is immediately followed by the bibliographic reference, read out by one of the actors.

The final section of the piece centers on the figures of Lina Heydrich and Thea Stangl, giving a glimpse of their postwar lives and in particular of their diametrically opposed perspectives on the past. Whereas Stangl, in a famous interview conducted by the historian Gitta Sereny, is clearly conflicted and finds it difficult to talk about that time, Heydrich, on the contrary, is entirely unapologetic and even proud of her achievements, as evinced by her 1976 autobiography. The actors read out substantial passages from both of these texts, ending with a long quotation from Sereny's book *Into That Darkness*, where at the end of their final interview in Brazil, Sereny asks Stangl whether, if she had issued her husband an ultimatum, "Treblinka—or me," he would have chosen her or the job.² Stangl at first responds, haltingly, that he would have chosen her, but later that night she writes a letter in which she retracts that answer, insisting that her husband would "never have destroyed himself or the family," the implication being that this would have been the consequence of resigning from his post. When Sereny calls Stangl about this letter, the latter begins to cry and says that she doesn't know which answer she wants Sereny to include in her book. Sereny tells her, "I would put in my book what she had said to me the previous day—which I thought was the truth. But that I would also add the letter, which only

showed what we all know, which is that the truth can be a terrible thing, sometimes too terrible to live with.”³ These are also the final words of *The Woman at His Side*.

Beyond the question of truth and the difficulty of living with it, these two answers also highlight the active and passive dimensions of “standing by” that I would like to draw out in this chapter. Here it is important to distinguish between bystandership in the moment, when crimes are committed, and a secondary bystandership after the fact, in the moment of bearing witness. Both have passive and active connotations. The implication of Thea Stangl’s first answer is that she could have intervened and that by not issuing an ultimatum she in fact actively (albeit through inaction) enabled her husband’s crimes. In this way, she would be what Ernesto Verdeja has called a “moral bystander,” bearing “some responsibility by virtue of being in a position to intercede and consequently alter the direction of events, and yet fail[ing] to act.”⁴ In her second answer, by contrast, Stangl insists that there was nothing she could have done to prevent her husband’s crimes and that he was in fact merely following orders to protect himself and the family. In this answer, she fashions herself as an innocent and passive bystander to the crimes of the Third Reich, and even her husband’s responsibility is diminished. In this scenario, she could not be described as a moral bystander, since she was unable to exercise morally significant agency, owing to external circumstances. It is important to emphasize that she is offering this interpretation of her capacity for agency in retrospect, so it cannot simply be considered neutral. Moreover, her retraction can also be seen as a consequence of her realization that with her first answer she had incriminated not only herself but also her husband. The revised answer, therefore, is itself a form of active bystandership in the sense that she “stood by” her man and his legacy.

The first form of bystandership has to do with the real or perceived scope for action available to an individual in the context of an atrocity. Applying this label, however, is an interpretation that is always on some level subjective and certainly not neutral or empirically verifiable. Therefore, labeling someone a bystander—or a perpetrator or victim, for that matter—is also always on some level strategic, that is, a means to a particular end. This strategy can be employed by the individuals themselves, as we see in the case of Thea Stangl. Here, I am principally interested in precisely this strategic dimension, which has more to do with representation and interpretation than with facts and empirical data. This is not to say that the facts are irrelevant but rather to insist that they are established, disseminated, and interpreted within a discursive field. In short, in what follows I will be less interested in

the term “bystander” as an ontological category, that is, whether these women *really were* bystanders, perpetrators, or something else. Rather, I am more interested in the various ways in which they have been represented and have represented themselves, in what is at stake in applying labels such as bystander, and in how such labels may in fact obscure dynamics that are more complex.

In what follows, I will proceed in three stages corresponding to three different yet interrelated layers of representation regarding the SS wives. The first concerns the historical record: who were these women, what did they do, and what did they know? Here I will rely principally on Schwarz’s study. Second, I will consider the representation of these women in scholarship, in the media, and in their own accounts, focusing particularly on Lina Heydrich’s controversial autobiography. Finally, I will return to *The Woman at His Side*, which I read as a critical meta-commentary on the previous layers: the piece integrates the insights and perspectives of current scholarship and brings them to bear on the representation of these women’s lives.

More specifically, the use of quotation and repetition in the piece constitutes an affirmative critique, both of the women themselves and of the popular and scholarly discourse that surrounds them. These techniques create room for reflection and engagement that has the potential, paradoxically, to produce a difference. This is not to suggest that we endorse, rehabilitate, or assent to these women’s words and actions. Rather, I am drawing here on the concept of the affirmative as it has been articulated in recent feminist philosophy as an alternative to traditional forms of critique, which tend, as Elizabeth Grosz writes, “to generate defensive self-representations” or else promote a dismissive stance toward the object of critique, presenting the moral and intellectual superiority of the critic as unassailable.⁵ *The Woman at His Side* does not try to legislate in advance how the audience should respond to these women’s words and in this way facilitates a more open-ended engagement with the profound questions their words and actions raise for us today.

The Historical Record: Who Were They, What Did They Do, What Did They Know?

Gudrun Schwarz’s *Eine Frau an seiner Seite* (1997) is the only in-depth study of the important position of women in the SS.⁶ Schwarz bases her study on the SS marriage files of the SS Race and Settlement Main Office (Rasse- und Siedlungshauptamt der SS), the files from the

Personal Staff of the Reich Leader of the SS (Hauptamt Persönlicher Stab Reichsführer-SS), including letters Himmler exchanged with the SS wives, and the Central Office of the State Justice Administrations (Zentrale Stelle der Landesjustizverwaltungen) in Ludwigsburg. She shows that, far from being a male-only elite organization, the SS under Himmler was actually a *Sippengemeinschaft* in which women played a crucial role, not only as the “keepers of the race” and mothers of future “Aryans” but also by normalizing of the crimes of the SS. From 1932 onward, all SS men were required to marry, and their would-be brides were subjected to rigorous vetting to determine their Aryan credentials as well as their moral and physical constitution. From 1931 to 1945, almost a quarter of a million women married into the SS.⁷ Many lived with their families in the SS settlements at concentration camps, ghettos, and in towns and villages in the occupied territories, where they inevitably came into close contact with the workings of the Nazi persecution and extermination machine. They profited directly and indirectly from the persecutions.⁸ Moreover, SS wives were “to establish a normal family life in the field in order to make the crimes their husbands committed there appear like an ordinary job. They were to mitigate the stress of the situation and thus enable their husbands to commit these terrible acts and to transform the place itself into something ordinary and everyday.”⁹ This involved hosting dinner parties, organizing leisure activities, and teaching children, but some wives took a more active part in the killing operations, for instance, by helping their husbands with the paperwork.¹⁰

In short, in the eyes of both the SS leadership and the wives themselves, the actions carried out by the SS would have been unthinkable without the support of the women in the *Sippengemeinschaft*. Thus, “the SS wives became perpetrators” themselves.¹¹ This loyalty continued after the end of the war when they helped their husbands hide and escape, and followed them into exile.¹² In the immediate postwar period, this loyalty was depoliticized and came to be seen as almost admirable and in some cases even served to rehabilitate the domestic values promoted by the *SS-Sippengemeinschaft* and National Socialism more generally.¹³ Schwarz discusses a series of illustrated feature stories published in the weekly *Die Strasse* in 1950 entitled “My Husband—The War Criminal,” each focusing on a different prominent SS family, and featuring interviews with the likes of Ilse Hess and Maria Frank. The image these women present of themselves and their family—unchallenged by the interviewer—is decidedly rose-tinted and fetishistic, imbued with a mixture of nostalgia and the cult of celebrity and notoriety. The term “war criminal” is presented almost as a badge of honor

and/or as an ironic reference to the cliché that history is written by the victors.¹⁴

This stance is taken up even more clearly in the title of Lina Heydrich's autobiography, *Leben mit einem Kriegsverbrecher* (Life with a war criminal), which is overtly ironic, given her defiantly unapologetic stance. The SS wives were never put on trial. Evidently, Schwarz concludes, the court adhered to a traditional conception of gender roles whereby "the woman's place was in the home, far from any opportunity to commit crimes or to participate in them."¹⁵ Nor was the court alone in this reductive view of female agency. In postwar German society, the steadfastness with which these women stood by their husbands "through thick and thin" made them appear as passive and apolitical bystanders. This was a role that many SS wives were only too eager to embrace. It was not until the late 1990s that this lenient appraisal of the SS wives' complicity came under critical scrutiny.

Representation in Scholarship, the Media, and Autobiography

Until quite recently, the discourse on women under National Socialism has overall been informed by a rather conservative understanding of femininity and gender roles. Indeed, there is a striking continuity between pre- and postwar representations of women, which tend to fall into the familiar dichotomy of innocence/depravity, mothers/whores.¹⁶ This had profound implications not only for how the trials against female Nazi perpetrators were reported in the press but also on the trials themselves. As already mentioned, most women who were implicated in the crimes of the Nazis, including the SS wives, were never prosecuted because they failed to meet the criterion of demonstrable and deliberate criminal action and were hence not considered legally liable.¹⁷ Those who *were* put on trial for their crimes, such as female concentration camp guards, were cast either as living proof of deviant femininity—the "beast," the *Mannweib* (she-man), or the "pervert"—or as victims of the circumstances, too young to understand what had truly been going on, or simply overwhelmed by the events.¹⁸ This resulted in acquittals or lenient sentences for the latter group, in sharp contrast to the sensationalized trials of the women in the former group, such as, for example, Ilse Koch, the "Beast of Buchenwald," and Irma Grese, the "Hyena of Auschwitz." This kind of sensationalism is an enduring element of popular representations of women under National Socialism in the media, in films, and on television.¹⁹

Changing conceptions of femininity and gender dynamics have also left their mark on scholarship. Christina Herkommer has identified three dominant historiographical paradigms: the “victim thesis” of the 1980s, the “perpetrator thesis” of the 1990s, and the more recent approaches, which are ultimately a further development and refinement of the perpetrator thesis, exploring a multiplicity of roles, subject positions, and scopes for action (*Handlungsräume*), taking into account the social constructedness of gender categories and other insights from feminist theory and cultural studies.²⁰ The gray zones and more fluid lines between perpetrators, bystanders, and profiteers, however, still need further exploration and theorization. Other works have laid the foundation for a theory of agency based on the concept of the *Handlungsraum*.²¹ Perhaps we might refer to this as the “bystander thesis.” Studying the *Handlungsräume* of people during the Nazi regime, as well as their own perception, at the time and in retrospect, of the relative freedom to make decisions reveals how bystandership is not the product of a singular failure to act but rather depends on a series of contingent decisions and as such is not an ontological category defined by passivity but rather an actively reinforced, relational subject position that must be continually produced and performed.

Ernesto Verdeja’s concept of the moral bystander can productively be read in conjunction with this “bystander thesis.” Central to Verdeja’s conception is the distinction between knowledge and acknowledgment. In order for an individual to be morally responsible for failing to act, they must have sufficient knowledge that an action or event in which they could potentially intervene is taking place. For this reason, the first line of defense against accusations of moral responsibility is the claim of ignorance. There is a difference, however, between knowledge of a crime and the acknowledgment that an action is in fact a crime. For Verdeja, this acknowledgment constitutes the criterion for moral bystanding. Thus, the category of the moral bystander depends on the subject’s interpretation of the event in question. This raises intriguing questions with regard to the two SS wives Thea Stangl and Lina Heydrich.

In her interview with Sereny, Stangl recounts the moment at which it was no longer possible for her to remain ignorant of the genocide and, crucially, appears at least in retrospect to acknowledge, albeit reluctantly, that this was a crime and that she could have done something. Of the two answers she gives to Sereny’s aforementioned question, the first, which Sereny judges to be the truth, is the one that makes her a moral bystander because she not only acknowledges that what was happening was a crime but also that she had the capacity to act. This answer might well be more satisfying for the reader and for Sereny as

the interpretive authority, not only because it feels closer to the truth but also because it allows us to maintain our faith in the individual's capacity to act morally in the face of atrocity. This, too, is a function of the category of the bystander as such: it asserts the possibility of moral action *ex negativo*: a bystander is someone who could and more importantly should have done something to prevent a crime. Therefore, the category of the bystander holds open the individual's scope for action while acknowledging the various constraints and limitations within a social system.

The importance of Verdeja's distinction between knowledge and acknowledgment becomes very clear if we turn to Lina Heydrich's autobiography, published around the same time as Sereny's book, in which we find a diametrically opposed ratio of the two terms. Heydrich takes pride in her knowledge of her husband's activities but resolutely refuses to acknowledge them as crimes that she could or should have sought to prevent. This lack of acknowledgment above all makes her book so disturbing and morally repugnant. Published in 1976, *Leben mit einem Kriegsverbrecher* describes the years she spent as the wife and later widow of Reinhard Heydrich, the chief of the Reich Main Security Office and deputy *Reichsprotektor* of Bohemia and Moravia in Prague. The text gives detailed insight not only into the Heydrichs' personal life but also into their ambitions and political calculations, as well as the intrigues and manipulations among the Nazi leaders. In contrast to what the title suggests, the book is anything but a reckoning with Lina Heydrich's complicity in her husband's crimes. The tone is unapologetic—Heydrich certainly does not think of her husband as a war criminal—and she brazenly presents herself as a victim of postwar "injustice."²²

The book is full of historical and chronological inaccuracies, most of which are nothing but deliberately exculpatory obfuscations. In order to draw attention to and compensate for these falsifications, the publisher asked the historian Werner Maser to provide an extensive commentary. Maser only reluctantly accepted the task, and his comments suggest that he does not take Heydrich very seriously. He states that the memoir should rather have been commented on by a psychiatrist, not a historian, and deplores the fact that she remained "invincible" by facts and documents, thus missing her chance at repentance.²³ To Maser, the memoir seems of value only insofar as it provides a glimpse into the personality of Reinhard Heydrich. The "politicizing widow" (as Himmler once disparagingly called Lina Heydrich) is for Maser, if anything, a pathological figure, alternately presented as an incorrigible liar or as a gullible housewife. He is decidedly uninterested in her as a person or a historical agent. Tellingly, while he goes to great lengths to

point out the mistakes she makes when speaking about her husband, he fails to draw attention to the significant ambiguity surrounding her own involvement in the regime.

This peculiar lack of interest in and apparently deliberate misreading of the figure of Lina Heydrich is corroborated by the book's blurb, an excerpt from a review in the German newspaper *Die Welt*, which asks: "Is Lina Heydrich perhaps a deeply apolitical person, which would explain a lot, or is she just pretending to be?" Both Maser's and the reviewer's assessments are wide of the mark, and while autobiographies in general and especially self-justificatory texts by morally suspect people like Heydrich should not be taken at face value, it is clear to anyone who reads this memoir carefully that she neither is nor pretends to be apolitical. While she is unquestionably a highly unreliable witness, we should not dismiss her text outright but rather read it even more carefully. This is especially important because the assessment of Heydrich as either ignorant or psychopathic exemplifies the stereotypical postwar discourse on women who had been involved in the Nazi regime as either depraved and sadistic or obedient and naive.

When reading the memoir, it becomes clear that Heydrich was an intelligent and ambitious woman with firm political convictions. Her book is a success story and, in a different context, could almost be read as a narrative of female empowerment. She details the crucial role she played in her husband's career—as a staunch National Socialist and a fervent antisemite,²⁴ it was she who persuaded her husband to join the Nazi Party and to consider a career in the SS—but also her own achievements as estate manager and farming expert before and after 1945.

The historical errors in the memoir certainly cannot be ascribed to her ignorance of the persecutory politics of the Nazis—a fact that is perhaps best illustrated by her critical remarks about what she perceived to be the intellectualism and incompetence of Himmler. In her opinion, if it had not been for people such as her husband, Himmler would have been utterly lost.²⁵ In the passages in which she describes how she and her husband discussed political events, Heydrich reveals, almost in spite of herself, the extent of her knowledge. Nevertheless, at no point does she address or acknowledge her own active involvement in and responsibility for the crimes committed by the Nazis. Not surprisingly, Heydrich was not pleased with Maser's dismissive commentary on her memoir and tried repeatedly to have it removed by the publisher. When she failed, she took matters into her own hands and simply cut out the offending pages from the copies she sent to her friends and family. In 2012, on the seventieth anniversary of Reinhard Heydrich's death, the memoir was republished by their son Heider, with a new introduction,

with amendments to the original text, and, most importantly, *without* the historical commentary included in the first edition. The title is now *Mein Leben mit Reinhard* (My life with Reinhard), and the publisher is the revisionist Druffel & Vowinkel, which is part of the Verlagsgruppe Berg, the biggest extreme-right publishing house in Germany.²⁶ However flawed one may find Maser's commentary of the first edition, it is even more problematic to have no critical framework at all.

Neither of the two editions facilitates the kind of engagement with this text and its author that might prompt critical self-reflection on the part of the reader. Maser clearly thinks that Heydrich has nothing worthwhile to tell us. He thus writes from a position of absolute moral superiority, but his refusal, to quote Grosz again, to "bother further with" her position is ultimately also a defensive attitude. How might one engage with the text without either endorsing or condemning it outright? Admittedly, her resolute lack of repentance and self-reflection make it difficult to read her text affirmatively, but it might still be worthwhile if it allows us to arrive at a deeper understanding of the worldview and motivations behind her actions—and perhaps even of our own assumptions, motivations, and agency.

The Woman at His Side

The Woman at His Side, I argue, can be read as an example of such an affirmative critique of SS wives' self-presentation. The performance is prefaced by a series of short statements, epigraphs almost, by some of the main protagonists. These statements were all given after the end of the war, either in interviews or in memoirs, and they return as leit-motifs over the course of the performance. They illustrate the different ways in which these women presented themselves to scholars and the public after the war.

Ruth Kalder-Göth, for example, was defiantly proud and still longed for her life with the KZ commandant Amon Göth: "Ah, yes, Göth—what a dream man. It was a beautiful time; we enjoyed being together. My Göth was the king, and I was his queen. Who wouldn't have traded places with us?" Fanny Fritsch, on the other hand, was in complete denial of the historical facts: "What they say about Auschwitz, about the extermination of the Jews, and all that—is a lie!" And Lina Heydrich presents herself and her husband as victims of the times: "Had the world not been so broken back then, today I would be not the wife of a war criminal but rather the wife of a brilliant violinist." Furthermore, these self-presentations functioned at the time as counternarratives to

the supposed mischaracterizations and lies in the press and in the popular imagination. Each woman speaks out against what they perceive to be a false representation of themselves and their husbands.

These opening statements serve several functions. The most immediate is that of prolepsis, casting the trajectory that follows in a certain light. Second, and relatedly, the statements recur as a kind of refrain that continues to comment on the narrative as it unfolds, and with each repetition the words take on a slightly different hue. This can itself be read as a meta-reflection on repetition as a representational device, which then refers back to the performance as a whole, which consists entirely of quotations. Finally, the wives' insistence that the dominant narrative circulating about them and their husbands is false and must be set right alludes to the constructedness of all narratives. Throughout the performance, some of these quotations are replayed on a Dictaphone, whose small speaker distorts the sound, adding a ghostly dimension but also invoking the documentary, journalistic, and legal context in which these statements were originally made. The women's words come back to haunt them. Repeated in the new context, the words now appear to comment on the atrocities that these women witnessed and facilitated. In a form of dramatic irony, they are thus made to incriminate themselves.

At this point, one might ask what the difference is between simply reading these women's words and attending a performance of *The Woman at His Side*, which, after all, consists almost entirely of those same words read out loud. In what way can this performance be considered a critical intervention into the discourse on women under National Socialism if it refrains from critical commentary? The answer lies on the one hand in the embodied presence of the three actors on stage who give voice to these words. Crucially, these are not the voices of Thea Stangl, Lina Heydrich, and others. While we do hear some original sound recordings, they are not of the women themselves, but of songs, speeches, or radio features. This editorial decision is reinforced by the use of the Dictaphone: even when we hear a recording of their statements, it is a recording of one of the three actors speaking the line. This redoubling of mediation serves to heighten our awareness of the artificiality of the performance and simultaneously focuses our attention on the performance itself. The recording refers to the performance and not to the historical record. This leads into the second answer, which is that it deliberately refuses to grant the authority and aura of authenticity to the SS wives that hearing them speak might convey. In this way, their thoughts, opinions, and self-justifications become divorced from their specific historical persona and begin to circulate in the theater as floating signifiers that can attach themselves to new referents in new



Figure 15.1. *The Woman at His Side* (post-performance Q&A), Filmtheater 't Hoogt, Utrecht, 1 September 2016. *From left:* Sabine Werner, Inga Dietrich, Joanne Gläsel. (Photo: Kári Driscoll.)

configurations. This is reinforced by the fact that the epigraphs and several of the other returning statements are not “signed,” that is, they are not followed by a name or attribution, which, given that each actor embodies multiple roles, means that it can be difficult or even impossible for the audience to know who exactly is speaking. Abstracted in this way from the individual biographies, these refrains become a kind of collage of the entire period.

In the writing, staging, and performance of the piece, the actors have taken great care to avoid indulging the kind of lurid fascination exemplified by the postwar magazine profiles on these women and their family life, as well as more recent popular representations on television and in other media, where the emphasis is always on the transgressive and illicit frisson of danger and evil that we may vicariously experience through these women and their stories. This is doubly important given that the piece is often performed at concentration camp memorials and other sites dedicated to the victims of Nazi persecution: in such a setting, any hint of glorification or voyeurism would be inappropriate and offensive.²⁷ It is equally important to avoid the opposite

reaction, namely, immediate condemnation and repugnance, which likewise foreclose a genuine engagement with the complex moral, ethical, and representational questions at hand. *The Woman at His Side* aims to facilitate an encounter between the audience and these texts. And here it is important that this shared experience takes place in a specific location at a specific moment. We are invited to spend time with these women, albeit at a distance, not to condemn them outright but rather to affirm them, which, again, does not imply approval or endorsement but rather connotes an openness to the other and to one's encounter with it—a critical generosity. It means not taking one's own moral superiority for granted, at least not in a defensive attitude of the kind exhibited by Maser, for example. *The Woman at His Side* holds on to the idea that there is something to be learned from engaging with these women. At a minimum, this may serve to block the too-easy assertion that "I would have behaved differently," and this can be a valuable if uncomfortable insight. Conversely, it would be too easy to fall into the trap of moral relativism and say that, given the social and political circumstances at the time, there probably wasn't anything anyone could have done.

Virtually every performance is followed by an audience discussion with the actors, which is an important feature of the critical engagement with the material. It affords the audience an opportunity to ask questions pertaining to the creative process, the representational and aesthetic decisions that went into making the piece, as well as to discuss the questions of guilt and responsibility and scope for action. Conversely, these Q&A sessions enable the actors to gauge the audience's reaction, which can then help them revise the piece further. The reception has been overwhelmingly positive, in the press and among the audience, and on several occasions audience members have emphasized how the piece has prompted them to reevaluate their attitude toward their own family history. A performance of *The Woman at His Side* can be considered a success if it prompts this kind of critical reevaluation or reassessment, not only of the SS wives but also of the contemporary relevance of their biographies and actions. This reassessment hinges on the audience's willingness to be unsettled and to reevaluate their own position. In other words, the piece gives the audience credit and trusts them to be able to make up their own minds, albeit with clear guidance.

It is no coincidence, therefore, that the performance ends with Thea Stangl and not Lina Heydrich. This becomes very clear if we compare the stage play to the radio play, directed by Maiowitz, which preserves the narrative arc and many of the stylistic devices but omits the epigraphs and their repetition, as well as almost all of Stangl's account, including

her reluctant acknowledgment of her own guilt. Instead, the radio play ends with Ruth Kalder-Göth's delusional description of Amon Göth as the perfect man, comparable only to Rhett Butler in *Gone with the Wind*, which, by implication, casts her as Scarlett O'Hara and their time at Plaszow as a romantic fantasy. As the music from the film swells, she declares that their life was glorious and that she has no regrets—that it was worth it to have soared like an eagle, if only for a brief moment. Thus, the radio play ends on a note of defiant pride and idealized nostalgia, which is bitterly ironic given the historical facts. We can only shake our heads in disbelief at this display of crass indifference and lack of self-awareness. This ending, together with the abundant use of original recordings and incidental music, certainly provides an immersive listening experience but ultimately limits the range of possible responses. Above all, the audience never needs to feel uncertain or insecure in their own moral superiority.

The Thea Stangl ending of the stage version, by contrast, performs a difficult and reluctant self-questioning, which, in turn, is harder for the audience to condemn. This is not to say that we automatically feel sympathy for her or uncritically accept her account, but the degree to which we should believe her is left open. Moreover, this ambiguity may prompt us to reflect on how we would have acted in her situation and come to terms with it after the fact. Whether we believe her or not, this ending makes it difficult to declare unequivocally either that one would certainly have taken action or that there was nothing that could have been done. In this way, Stangl's conflicted recognition of her own guilt serves to insist on the individual's capacity for moral agency. From this perspective, perhaps, it is also then necessary to affirm the category of the bystander as a figure of potentiality—not for its negative connotations of inaction and cowardice but rather for its implicit hope that things could have been otherwise.

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Notes

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1. Sabine Werner, Inga Dietrich, and Joanne Gläsel, *The Woman at His Side: Careers, Crimes, and Female Complicity under National Socialism*, trans. Kári Driscoll (unpublished manuscript, 2016); Gudrun Schwarz, *Eine Frau an seiner Seite: Ehefrauen in der SS-“Sippengemeinschaft”* (Berlin, 2001).
2. Gitta Sereny, *Into that Darkness: From Mercy Killing to Mass Murder* (1974; repr., London, 1995), 361.
3. *Ibid.*, 362.
4. Ernesto Verdeja, “Moral Bystanders and Mass Violence,” in *New Directions in Genocide Research*, ed. Adam Jones (New York, 2012), 154.
5. Elizabeth Grosz, *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power* (Durham, NC, 2005), 3.
6. While more recent studies of women in the Third Reich do discuss some of the SS wives, they rely heavily on Schwarz’s book; e.g., Kathrin Kompisch, *Täterinnen: Frauen im Nationalsozialismus* (Cologne, 2008) and Wendy Lower, *Hitler’s Furies* (London, 2014),
7. Schwarz, *Eine Frau*, 11.
8. *Ibid.*, 100.
9. *Ibid.*, 102. All translations are by Kári Driscoll unless otherwise indicated.
10. *Ibid.*, 229–237.
11. *Ibid.*, 103.
12. *Ibid.*, 239–269.
13. *Ibid.*, 270–278.
14. *Ibid.*, 272.
15. *Ibid.*, 237.
16. See Elke Frietsch and Christina Herkommer, “Nationalsozialismus und Geschlecht: Eine Einführung,” in *Nationalsozialismus und Geschlecht: Zur Politisierung und Ästhetisierung von Körper, “Rasse” und Sexualität im Dritten Reich und nach 1945*, ed. Elke Frietsch and Christina Herkommer (Bielefeld, 2009), 9–44; Susannah Heschel, “Does Atrocity Have a Gender? Feminist Interpretations of Women in the SS,” in *Lessons and Legacies VI: New Currents in Holocaust Research*, ed. Jeffrey M. Diefendorf (Evanston, IL, 2004), 300–321.
17. See Ulrike Weckel and Edgar Wolfrum, “Bestien” und “Befehlsempfänger”: *Frauen und Männer in NS-Prozessen nach 1945* (Göttingen, 2003), 9–21.
18. See Insa Eschebach, “Gesplante Frauenbilder: Geschlechterdramaturgien im juristischen Diskurs ostdeutscher Gerichte,” in Weckel and Wolfrum, “Bestien” und “Befehlsempfänger,” 95–116; Kathrin Meyer, “‘Die Frau ist der Frieden der Welt’: Von Nutzen und Lasten eines Weiblichkeitsstereotyps in Spruchkammerentscheidungen gegen Frauen,” in Weckel and Wolfrum, “Bestien” und “Befehlsempfänger,” 117–138.
19. See Johanna Gehmacher, “Im Umfeld der Macht: populäre Perspektiven auf Frauen der NS-Elite,” in Frietsch and Herkommer, *Nationalsozialismus und Geschlecht*, 49–69; Elissa Mailänder, “Unsere Mütter, unsere Großmütter: Erforschung und Repräsentation weiblicher NS-Täterschaft in Wissenschaft und Gesellschaft,” in *Nationalsozialistische Täterschaften: Nachwirkungen in Gesellschaft und Familie*, ed. Oliver von Wrochem and Christine Eckel (Berlin, 2016), 83–101; Anna Maria Sigmund, *Die Frauen der Nazis* (Munich, 1998).

20. Christina Herkommer, "Women under National Socialism: Women's Scope for Action and the Issue of Gender," in *Ordinary People as Mass Murderers: Perpetrators in Comparative Perspective*, ed. Olaf Jensen and Claus-Christian W. Szejnmann (Basingstoke, 2008), 100–107, 111–115.
21. Kirsten Heinsohn, Barbara Vogel, and Ulrike Weckel, eds., *Zwischen Karriere und Verfolgung: Handlungsräume von Frauen im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland* (Frankfurt, 1997); Sibylle Steinbacher, ed., *Volksgenossinnen: Frauen in der NS-Volksgemeinschaft* (Göttingen, 2007); Jutta Mühlenberg, "Die SS-Helferinnen und das weibliche Gefolge der SS: Tätigkeiten, Dienststellen und Einsätze von Frauen im Organisationsapparat der Waffen-SS," in *Die Waffen-SS: Neue Forschungen*, ed. Jan Erik Schulte, Peter Lieb, and Bernd Wegener (Paderborn, 2014), 99–114.
22. Lina Heydrich, *Leben mit einem Kriegsverbrecher* (Pfaffenhofen, 1976), 147.
23. *Ibid.*, 161–162.
24. Robert Gerwarth, *Reinhard Heydrich: Biographie* (Munich, 2011), 61–62.
25. Heydrich, *Leben mit einem Kriegsverbrecher*, 85–86.
26. Lina Heydrich, *Mein Leben mit Reinhard: Die persönliche Biographie*, ed. Heider Heydrich (Gilching, 2012).
27. Personal communication with Sabine Werner, December 2016.

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