

FRITZI MASSARY

by Dr David C. F. Wright

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Fritzi Massary has been wrongly described as an opera singer and an actress, but she was a singer of operetta and an actress.

In the summer of 1900, at the age of eighteen, this soubrette from Vienna wanted to make both a career and a name for herself in North Germany. She made her way to Hamburg where the Ensemble of the Berlin Thalia Theatre would be making guest appearances in the Carl Schultze Theatre. If Fritzi had her chance she would meet the theatre director, Jean Kren. He was requesting the Hamburg director, Max Monti, for a pretty girl to act as a ladies maid in a forthcoming production and Monti, who had just met this little Viennese girl, sent his new discovery to director Kren. This introduction was not successful, but Monti kept her in his company for the season in the Ensemble of the Carl Schultze Theatre, and then sent her back home to Vienna with the comment that ambition and hard work without any talent, were not enough to succeed in the theatre.

Massary was not particularly attractive and did not have a great voice by any means, but she was destined to be a star on the stage for about 20 years.

She was born Friederike Massaryk on the 31 March 1882 in Vienna, the daughter of a merchant. In 1897, she was taken on by the Carl Theatre and went on a Russian tour. Her career began in the chorus of that Moscow tour. There is no evidence that she appeared with the Carl Theatre in Vienna. In 1899 she was employed in Linz and had her debut on 24 September 1899 in a farce called *The Governess*. The Linz newspaper said that in this her debut she was commendable, but that she tried too hard. In 1900 came the trip to Hamburg, but her sights were set on the Berlin Troupe. With the Hamburg Company she appeared as Mollie in *The Geisha Girl* and in *Danzers Orpheum*. She returned to Vienna in 1901 where she stayed until April 1904. On 30 April 1903, she abandoned the Jewish religion to become a Protestant and, on the 10 September 1903, she gave birth to a daughter, Liesl, who, many years later, was to marry the author, Bruno Frank.

Richard Schultz, the director of the Berlin Metropolitan Theatre, visited a performance of *Danzers Orpheum* and liked the 22 year old actress and gave her a job in Berlin. On 29 October 1904, Massary appeared before the Berlin public in a spectacular farce called *Gentlemen from Maxim* but she was not yet a star. She had to contend with more talented and prettier actresses. But she developed the ability to perform in a harmless but highly risqué way that appealed to the audience particularly the men who all thought that she was flirtatiously speaking directly to them. She was being transformed from a cheeky young actress into the incomparable and adorable Berlin super star and the fame that she enjoyed up to 1933. In 1911 she was in a position to demand the same top salary of the most experienced members of the Metropolitan Theatre. Schultz was casual about this and allowed Massary to leave. This departure began her 22 years as a star. She went to Max Reinhardt's Artist Theatre in Munich and began with a performance of *Beautiful Helena*.

The *New York Times* of the 23 January 1910 had announced the engagement of Massary to Count Alexander von Talleyrand-Perigold, a banker and the youngest son of one of the wealthiest families in Germany.

In 1920, Massary featured as the lead in Oscar Strauss's *Der letzte Walzer* and became the focal point for six of his subsequent works. In his early career, Strauss had received encouragement from both Brahms and Max Bruch but turned to operetta and light music early on, since he was inadequate for the demands of serious music.

Another composer who wrote for Massary was Leo Fall (1873-1925), a dull and miserable man, who also could not make the grade in more significant music. His operettas include *The Eternal Waltz* (1912) *Die Rose von Stramboul* (1916) and *Madame Pompadour* (1922). The composers Robert Stoltz and Franz Lehár (1870-1948) also created roles for her.

But Massary was wayward. She often did not sing what was written and made her own rules. In a production of *The Merry Widow* in Berlin on Christmas Day 1928, the action was changed to South America and all the



big tunes were given to her, whether they were for her role or not. The Weibermarsch which is always sung by a male choir, she sang. The Anstand'ge Frau duet sung by Valencienne and Rossillion was 'pinched' by Massary and her Danilo, sung by the light tenor Walter Jankuhn. These examples were not what Lehar wrote.

But she rose to prominence that every season in which a Massary premiere was the highlight. For a time there was Massary fever and she became a role model for operetta divas. She was renowned for her sense of clothes fashion both on and off the stage. But Massary's only really prestigious collaboration was with the distinguished conductor Bruno Walter as Adele in *Die Fledermaus* by Johann Strauss II.

Fritzi married the comic actor Max Pallenburg (1877- 1934). They amassed great wealth and at a time when Germany's finances were in turmoil. Massary demanded 25% of the cash takings from each performance which amounted to about 2750 marks a day.

In August 1932, there was the final Massary premiere in *A Woman who Knows what She Wants* at the Metropole. The famous title song was to become her farewell both to Berlin and to Germany and at her official retirement. Because of their Jewish heritage, the Pallenburgs were forced to flee Germany in 1933 and moved to Switzerland. Pallenburg was tragically killed in a plane crash in 1934. Massary performed in London and Vienna during the next few years until she moved to Hollywood in 1938.

In London, she took part in Noel Coward's musical, *Operette*, which also starred Peggy Wood, Ross Landon, Hugh French and the British composer, Benjamin Frankel. Coward had written the music and lyrics solely to obtain the services of 55 year-old Massary, but her English was not good. The show opened at His Majesty's Theatre in March 1938 and ran for 133 performances. It is only now remembered for the song *The Stately Homes of England*.

In California, she lived at 606 Bedford Drive, Beverley Hills and then at 520 North Canon Drive and, after 1943, at 615 North Rodeo Drive.

In 1945, her son-in-law Bruno Frank died. He had originally been a law student and, with Liesl, left Germany on the day following the burning of the Reichstag in March 1933. For the next four years they lived between Austria and London before going to America in October 1937. After arriving in New York, the Franks went to California when they were reunited with Thomas Mann and Lion Feuchtwanger. Bruno Frank's work was translated into English in the 1920s and his two novels written in exile were also translated into English.

Fritzi died on 30 January, 1969 two months before her 87th birthday. Her obituaries described her as an Austrian-American soprano. Ten years later her daughter died.

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