

SHAW 18 FESTIVAL

Grand Hotel Study Guide Transcript

Grand Hotel – Book by Luther Davis, Music and Lyrics by Robert Wright and George Forest. Based on Vicki Baum’s *Grand Hotel*; by arrangement with Turner Broadcasting Co., Owner of the motion picture Grand Hotel. Additional music and lyrics by Maury Yeston.

Directed by Eda Holmes, Music Direction by Paul Sportelli. Choreography by Parker Esse. Designed by Judith Bowden; Lighting designed by Kevin Fraser, Sound designed by John Lott.

“Grand Hotel, Berlin. Always the same. People come. People go. Look at them – living the high life! But time is running out.” – The Doctor, Grand Hotel

Welcome to the Grand, the world’s most expensive hotel. The year is 1928 – midway between the World Wars and at the height of the Stock Market boom. Berlin, capital of Germany, is regarded as one of the world’s most glamorous and cultured cities.

As we begin the show, we meet A Doctor, who introduces us to life at the hotel, and acts as our narrator. The Doctor is a veteran of the First World War, and is in constant pain from his wounds. He uses morphine to dull the anguish he suffers from his memories of the war.

The Doctor introduces us to the many guests staying at The Grand Hotel, including a Baron, who is long on titles but short on money. Otto Kringelein, a lowly bookkeeper who is terminally ill, arrives, looking for “life”. After the Baron helps him, the two become fast friends. Unfortunately, trouble seems to be brewing for the Baron, who is being followed by a shadowy Chauffeur.

The Baron meets a famous ballerina, named Elizaveta Grushinskaya. She is at the end of her career, and is making her 8th farewell tour. She is accompanied by Raffaella, her devoted companion and assistant, and her manager and business agent.

Hermann Preysing is a business man reporting to his stockholders. He is awaiting news of an important merger from Boston that could make or break his business. Miss Frieda Flamm arrives at the hotel to act as Preysing's typist. She is an aspiring actress and has dreams of becoming known as "Flaemmchen" – a famous star in Hollywood...but Frieda has a secret that could derail her aspirations.

Rounding out the cast of characters is a plethora of wealthy hotel guests, the staff who look after their needs, and the poverty-stricken scullery workers that clean up after the hotel's elite and wealthy guests. They are angry at the poverty they endure, and resent the wealth that seems to flow so freely from the hotel's guests.

While it appears on the surface that the Grand Hotel is a glittering, happy place, there is a dark underbelly to the hotel's operations, and events are about to transpire that will forever change the lives of its' inhabitants.

So, what's the production you will be seeing at the Shaw Festival all about? What makes our version unique?

The Shaw's *Grand Hotel* takes much of its inspiration from the original novel, written by Vicki Baum in 1929. Baum was an Austrian writer, and the original title, *Menschen im Hotel*, means "People at a Hotel". Her story examines the experiences people have in one such establishment. Baum actually took a job as a Berlin hotel maid for a brief period of time to research her characters.

The author, Vicki Baum, had a pretty interesting life. She was not only a successful musician and journalist, but she was also one of the first female boxers to train in Berlin, along with actress Marlene Dietrich. Baum began writing in her teens, and published almost a novel a year from 1919 until 1962 – a total of more than 50 books. Many were adapted into motion pictures in Hollywood, and often featured strong, independent women caught up in turbulent times.

Originally published as a magazine serial, Baum's *Grand Hotel* was a success, spawning a play in 1929, and a movie in 1932. Baum emigrated to the United States to work on the screenplay for the film, which won the 1932 Academy Award for Best Picture.

A later version of the stage production was made in the 1950s, called “At the Grand,” but it was not as successful as the original play. The show resurfaced in the 1980s, when it was resurrected and reworked by a new creative team. This version included some new songs and lyrics, and is what’s known as an “integrated musical” – there is music throughout the whole show, even underneath the dialogue. It is this version of Grand Hotel that you will be seeing at The Shaw.

Just as there is constant music, there is also constant movement, even when there aren’t big production numbers happening on stage. The dance sequences that are included in the show are based around popular social dances of the 1920s, such as the Charleston, Tango and the Foxtrot, as well as numbers that reference more classical dance forms, such as ballet, tap and ballroom dance.

The Shaw’s 2018 production features original set and costume designs by Judith Bowden. Watch for how the costumes help to tell the story of each character. Consider who has money and power, and who does not – and how that is reflected in their clothing. Who is happy, and who is striving to be someone else? How is that reflected in their costuming?

The design of our show features huge columns and rotating mirrored panels, which can be moved around the stage to create different areas of the hotel. There is no computer automation in this show. All of the sets are actor and crew powered to reflect the idea that the hotel is “made up by the people,” and that there is a whole workforce that is required to support the lavish lifestyle of its guests.

The set also features many mirrors, lights, and reflective surfaces that are capturing and reflecting back a specific moment in time. There are many elements in the characters and story that reflect each other, such as the rich guests and poor employees, or the young and beautiful with the aging and the unhappy. As the story proceeds, the extra props and finery are stripped away. By the end of the show, it is just the characters telling the story.

Our musical is set in 1928 Berlin. But what was life actually like back then? How does *Grand Hotel* reflect the real history?

The 1920s in Germany were a time of rapid societal change and upheaval. Until the end of WWI, Germany had been ruled by a Monarchy, and Germany’s military commanders had wielded a lot of power. But in 1918, after witnessing the horrors of WWI, the German people lost faith in their leaders. Germany experienced a revolution and the ruling class was overthrown. To replace the monarchy, a new democracy, known as the Weimar Republic, was formed. This was the first time that a democratic form of government was introduced in Germany, but it was also very fragile.

In 1919, the Versailles Treaty set out the terms of peace following WWI, harshly punishing Germany for the war.

The Treaty of Versailles was met with protest in Germany. A transfer of German lands, high reparation payments, and the “War Guilt Clause,” which laid the blame for the war solely on Germany, were seen as highly offensive and unfair. Demonstrations leading up to the signing of the treaty tried to prevent Germany's leaders from accepting this harsh peace. But facing catastrophic food shortages and a helpless, decommissioned military, the German coalition government saw no alternative to signing the treaty.

Adding to Germany's economic woes was the onset of hyperinflation, which occurs when the prices of goods and services rise more than 50% per month. In January 1923, French and Belgian troops occupied an industrial area in Germany, in an effort to force war reparation payments. The German government did not have enough money to make these payments, so they began to print more money. In fact, they printed so much money that it became worthless almost as soon as it was printed. In November 1923 the German Reichsbank issued the first 100-trillion-mark note, and by the end of the month, 1 U.S. dollar was worth 4.2 *trillion* marks.

As hyperinflation crippled the German economy, the living circumstances of large segments of the population grew increasingly dire. By the autumn of 1923, Germany's currency was worthless. People stood in long lines and bought goods as quickly as they could since their money was losing value by the hour. Unable to keep pace with inflation, many grocers and merchants switched to foreign currency, or simply bartered for goods and services. Those who could afford it turned to the stock market to make or expand their fortunes. Some people became incredibly rich playing the market, while others lost everything. Watch for how this new economy impacts the characters in *Grand Hotel*.

Wounded veterans of the Great War – a common sight on the streets of Weimar Germany – were among those hardest hit by the great inflation. This was the first time that mechanized warfare had so greatly damaged humans, both physically and mentally, but the development of medicines, such as penicillin and morphine, allowed those who would have previously perished from their wounds to survive the war. The result was a significant number of wounded veterans who were unable to work, much like the Doctor in *Grand Hotel*. This circumstance contributed not only to the economic burden on Germany in the post-war years, but also to the aesthetic of the time period – many artists began focusing on the dark and morbid in their works as a reflection of the war experience.

The deprivations, upheaval and uncertainty of the post-WWI Weimar era inspired a newly creative and avant-garde atmosphere, especially in Berlin, and many types of arts and culture flourished, including the Dada and Bauhaus art movements.

One of these new artists was Otto Dix. His works realistically examined post-war society, and the suffering of the lower classes, especially veterans. He also sharply criticized the decadence of the upper classes, who were partying and spending extravagantly, while those below them suffered. The aesthetic and ideas behind Dix's artwork has inspired some of the design for our production of *Grand Hotel*.

A flourishing music scene emerged, and along with it, a new nightlife in the Kabarets and Clubs of Berlin. Some of the most famous artists and songs of the 20th century came out of 1928 Berlin, including the song "Mack the Knife" from Brecht and Weill's *The Threepenny Opera*, seen here in a clip from the 1989 film, with Roger Daltrey performing this iconic song. [clip of film]

A thriving film industry also developed, based in Berlin. One of the most famous films to come out of 1920s Berlin was *Blue Angel*, starring Marlene Dietrich.

With the establishment of the Weimar Republic, censorship laws were abolished. This freedom resulted in a new – and unprecedented - openness in Berlin's cultural scene. This change in Berlin society in the 1920s meant that people of different races, diverse sexual orientations, and varied political beliefs came to be viewed in a more open way. As the director of our show, Eda Holmes, says "There were lots of kinds of people in Berlin in the 1920s, despite what the Nazis wanted people to believe."

Our director notes that while 1928 Berlin was a remarkable moment in time, it also has similarities to our world today. As she says, "It's interesting the parallel between that moment and the moment we are living right now. This thing where it feels like there is so much possibility but there's so much danger...we are living on the edge of something."

We look forward to seeing you soon at the Shaw Festival!