

# THE EUROPEAN ROUTE



Theater Putbus



## Historical Putbus Theatre

GERMANY



**PERSPECTIV**  
Gesellschaft der historischen Theater Europas  
Association of Historic Theatres in Europe  
Association des théâtres historiques d'Europe

## **A Swedish – Prussian Story.**

Since the end of the Thirty Years' War in 1648, although large stretches of the southern Baltic coast were under Swedish rule, Swedish supremacy was slowly and steadily disintegrating. By 1800, however, Sweden still possessed some parts of Western Pomerania (Vorpommern) and the island of Rügen, over which the lords of Putbus had ruled as Swedish governors for many years. It wasn't surprising, therefore, that the youngest offspring of that dynasty, Wilhelm Malte (1783 – 1854) completed his military service with the Life Hussars in Stockholm. Prior to that, he had studied Law, Archeology, Physics and Chemistry at the universities of Greifswald and Göttingen.

Wilhelm Malte succeeded to his father's estates in 1787 and in 1807 was elevated to the rank of Prince by King Gustav IV Adolf of Sweden. In the same year, the island of Rügen was occupied by the Napoleon troops but in 1813, immediately after their withdrawal, the Prince was appointed Vice-Governor General of the whole of Swedish West Pomerania by the Swedish King. At the same time, the King wanted to give that area over to Denmark who had just lost Norway to Sweden. Following Prince Malte's considerable diplomatic efforts, Rügen and Western Pomerania became part of Prussia under the terms of The Congress of Vienna in 1815. At this Congress, Wilhelm Malte I was confirmed as a Prussian Prince, Governor General of Western Pomerania and Chancellor of the Greifswald University.

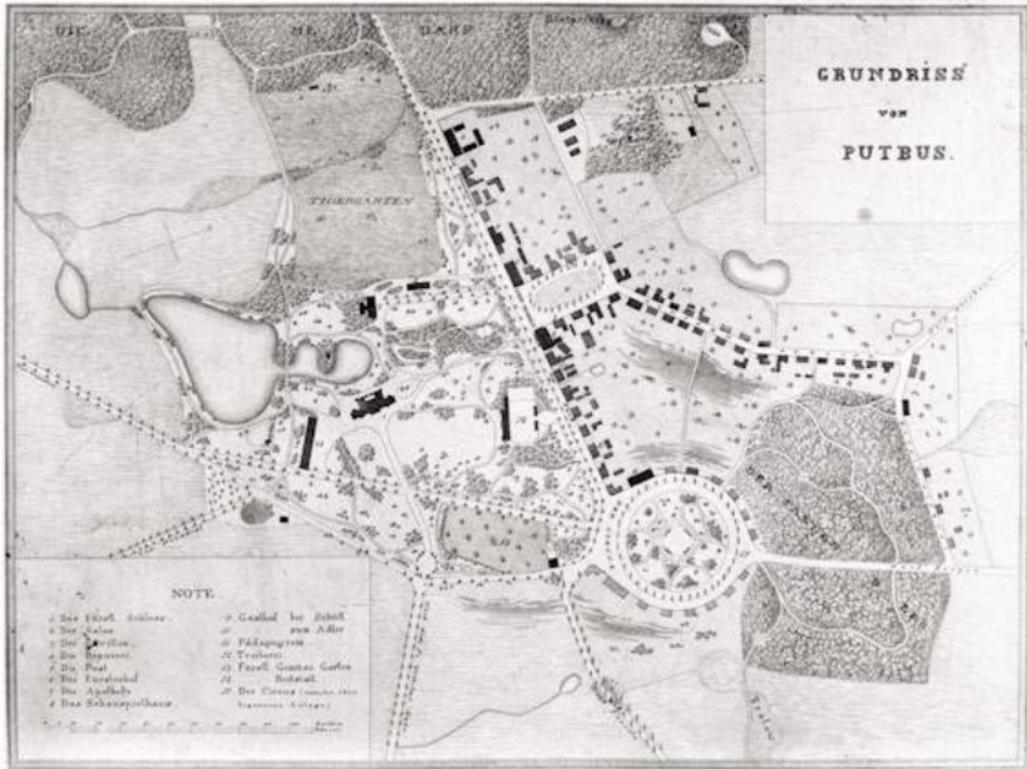
The most important outcome, however, was that Rügen was no longer cut off from the mainland by the Swedish border. This meant that the whole of Prussia was open to the Prince and that the Prussians could now travel to his island freely. This they did, especially when Prince Malte founded the first seaside resort on Rügen at Lauterbach. It is the oldest German Spa after Heiligendamm. And just as Heiligendamm is actually only a beach of the resort of Bad Doberan, Lauterbach was originally just a bathing bay of the inland resort, the capital city of Putbus.



*Wilhelm Malte zu Putbus, founder of Putbus and the Royal Playhouse builder © Michaela zu Putbus*

### **A picturesque Spa Town.**

Early in his career, Prince Malte had a vision for the development of a capital town in the area around his palace and park. The first business, a brewery, was built on the avenue that runs past the Royal Park in 1809. A guesthouse and a workmen's house were added in 1810. At that stage Prince Malte considered these buildings a sufficient reason to announce the foundation of the town of Putbus but for a long time no other construction took place. However, when Rügen became part of Prussia, the Prince came up with a brilliant idea: if his capital town were at the same time a health resort (a spa, in modern parlance), then service providers and workmen would come and settle there and so the building of the city could be financed through spa revenues.



City map of Putbus, 1834 © Stiftung Preussische Schlösser und Gärten Berlin-Brandenburg

And so, one house after another was built along the avenue. Buildings were to be erected on one side of the street only, so that the public sauntering through the Palace Gardens would be able to view the beautiful facades. The Prince himself decided what these houses should look like and at what distance from each other they should be built. He also ordered rosebushes to be planted in front of each house and these rules have been observed ever since. A large rectangular market square was created on the town's only street. At the end of it, where the street meets the avenue which leads to The Bathing House at the beach, an impressive round Square, the Circus, was built. This was inspired by the example of The Circus in the spa town of Bath in England, but instead of being enclosed by a continuous circle of terrace houses with a joined facade, the Putbus Circus is surrounded by detached buildings which allows the observer to see between them and enjoy a view to the sea. Gradually, a model town along Classical lines rose amongst a landscaped piece of nature. The white buildings of Putbus were a big novelty on the island, although they were quite familiar to many spa visitors from Berlin, a city already dominated by Classicism.



Friedrich Rosmäsler "The Putbus Theatre", © Stiftung Preussische Schlösser und Gärten Berlin-Brandenburg

### **The vision of an antique theatre.**

In 1819-21, the new capital town of Putbus was given its own theatre by Prince Malte but there is still a lot of uncertainty regarding the identity of its architect. Was it Friedrich Wilhelm Steinbach (only 20 years old at the time) who was building in Putbus in the second half of the 1820's? Or was it Schinkel's friend Johann Gottfried Steinmeyer (1780-1851), a builder from Berlin? He travelled with Schinkel around Italy in their student days and became interested in modern theatre. So interested in fact, that during his stay in Vienna, Steinmeyer studied stage machinery in the new "Theater an der Wien". In any case the theatre was modernized in 1826 by Steinmeyer and it has preserved its appearance until nowadays, thanks first of all to a comprehensive restoration in the years of 1992-98. During this restoration the original features and colours were revealed as the layers of later years were stripped away. The theatre was then newly painted following these old designs so that now it looks almost exactly the same as in 1826: a gem of neoclassical architecture.



Motif above the proscenium loge; right: uncovered traces, left: reconstruction



Creating a mood of elegance and dignity, grey, blue, and ochre tones discreetly dominate the semi circle of the auditorium, whilst flowers and foliage in golden colours stretch along both balconies. Acanthus leaves crown the Royal box. Freestanding Greek pillars carry the lower balcony, whilst half pillars, protruding from the wall, support the upper balcony which is thus set back. The idea of an antique theatre is apparent, without it being a copy. Elegant wrought iron railings, a contemporary element which is unique in German theatre landscape, guard the fronts of both balconies. This style is consistently followed in the foyers and the facade. Only the ceiling and the stage machinery are modern. The historical stage machinery was supposedly replaced in 1913; nothing is known about the ceiling design of 1826. The proscenium boxes are now a bit compressed because the stage has been brought forward. Originally they were deeper than the orchestra pit.



*above: View of the auditorium from the stage, below: View of the auditorium from the 2nd balcony*

Two walls in the upper foyer were decorated with illusionistic painting of architraves, as was discovered by restorers. The architraves had nothing to do with the foyer itself, they served apparently the architect's attempt to show a possible design of the entrance facade. They had been painted over in accordance with the general foyer design before the theatre was opened. These witnesses of the theatre development history were uncovered as a result of restoration.

A column portico and a triangular gable adorn the main facade. The gable corners are enthroned with top stone pieces designed in the style of the balcony railing inside. The tympanum is bare. As some compensation, one can see a relief with Apollo and nine Muses standing freely around him at the first floor level behind the columns. If you expect to find the theatre entrance behind the imposing portico, you are wrong. The street facade is only meant to catch attention of spa visitors, strolling through the park or along the avenue.



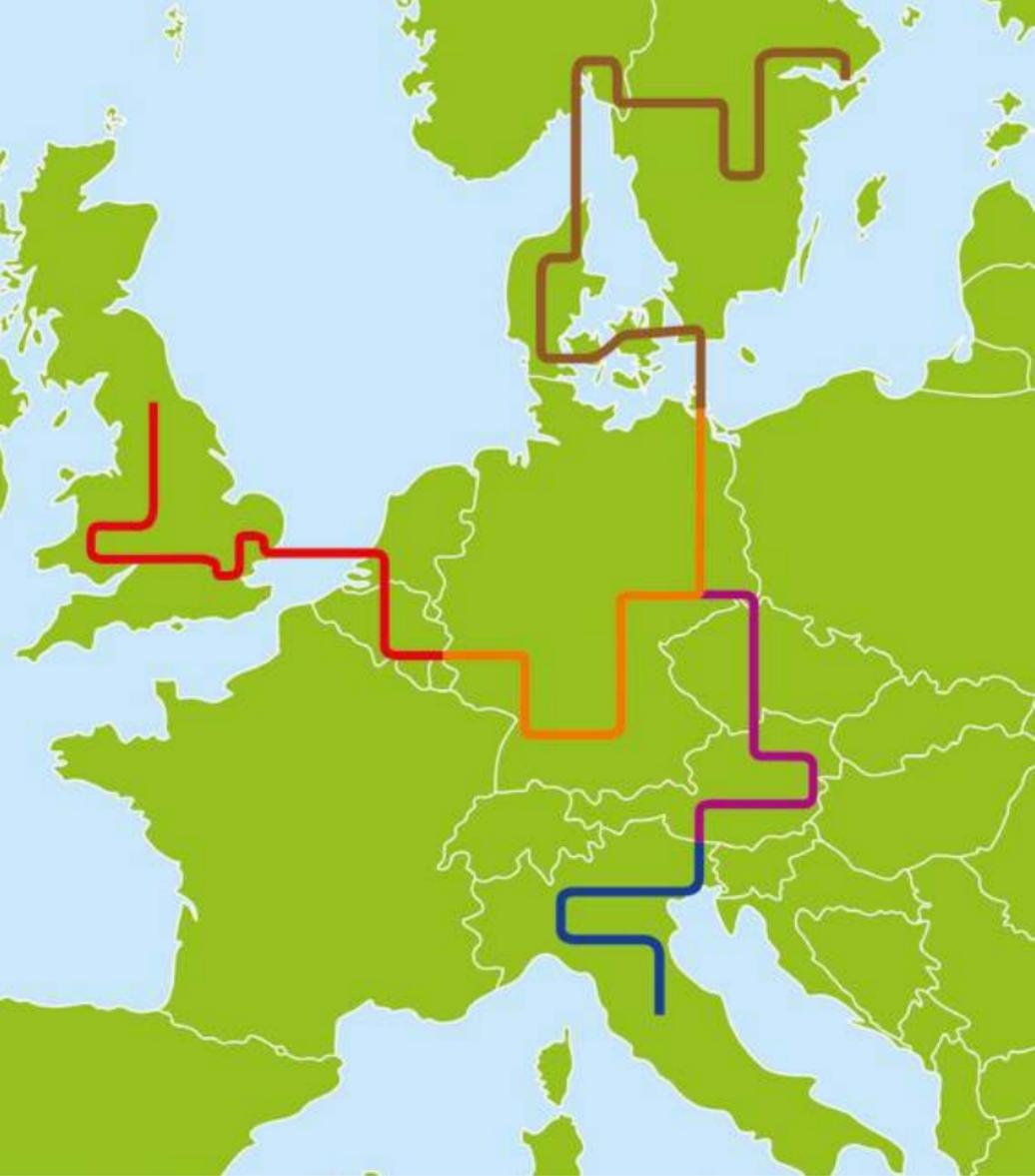
*View of the theatre from the park*



*View of the theatre from the market square*

Since the opening of the theatre, the main entrance has been hiding itself on the narrow side looking onto the market square. Its decoration is inconspicuous: just a lyre on the roof, a clock on the gable and a couple of theatre masks.

The town fulfilled a double purpose as a capital and a spa in one. This can also be said about the theatre. It was supposed to satisfy Prince's aspiration, as well as to serve entertainment needs of spa visitors, and to educate the citizens, which was particularly important to the Prince. Presently, Theater Vorpommern Ltd offers about 300 performances a year in this venue to the public's delight, the locals and holiday makers alike, just as it was at Prince Malte's time.



### **The European route**

There are theatres everywhere in Europe. It is part of our culture. Yet, it is an ephemeral type of art: after a performance is over, it exists only in memory. However, there is something that remains – theatre buildings. Every theatre can reveal something about the times when it was built, about intentions of its builder, relationship between the public and the artists, about co-operation of artists across all borders, and about changing times. All theatres have also something else in common, which belongs to European culture: the theatre architecture as we know it today was developed in the 17th century in Italy and from there spread all over Europe. This means that theatre is one of the very few really European types of buildings. Some carefully selected historical theatres have been joined by the European route of historical theatres.

This makes it fairly easy to experience this very special part of European cultural heritage. The European route consists of several individual routes. Each route joins about 10 theatres, and it is quite possible to complete it in a week. It all started with the Germany route in 2007. Since then, the European route has been growing every year. You are very welcome to take part and travel further on the Northern route which takes you to some exquisite theatres in Norway, Denmark and Sweden. Or why don't you spend some lovely time in the South on the Italy route to the oldest European theatres and selected private theatres. Or treat yourself to a "Royal" holiday following the Kaiser route to aristocratic theatres in Austria and the Czech Republic. You can also learn everything about historical theatres in Belgium, the Netherlands, and Great Britain along the English Channel route.

### **Historical Putbus Theatre Germany**

The Putbus Theatre is accessible for people with impaired mobility, and it is equipped with facilities for hearing impaired as well. There are altogether 256 seats in the auditorium. The theatre is open the whole year round except the winter break in January-February. Guided tours are offered Monday to Friday when the performance schedule allows.

## Imprint

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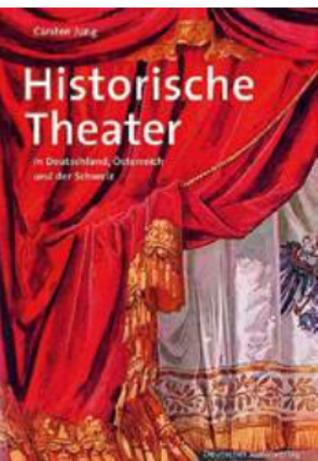
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