

towards a popular theatre

New Fields of Action

by MICHEL SAINT-DENIS

I BELIEVE that the dominant part played by the producer is coming to an end. Since 1895 however, the development of that side of the Theatre which deserves the name of dramatic art has been led by Antoine and Stanislavsky, by Granville Barker, Craig, Appia, Max Reinhardt and Jacques Copeau. These great men were "reformers"; the disciples who came after them developed their work, but without the strength of the original impulse.

It was these "reformers" who brought about the domination of the producer—with his absolute power over the choice of play, style of presentation and casting—and to this domination we owe the fact that the finest actors were prepared, often willingly, to become part of an ensemble. The authority and the prestige of well-known producers were so great that they could achieve financial success even with plays of an experimental nature: now and again, however, the sheer quality of the production masked the mediocrity of the play, or overshadowed the actors.

There are still star producers to whom managements turn when they want to ensure the success of a particularly difficult play. but these men of talent are less and less attached to a permanent enterprise; the actors follow their lead less and less readily; consequently they are becoming less and less sure of themselves. For the means of realisation evade them; they shine in splendid isolation, but they are forced to improvise, and to go round from theatre to theatre, from play to play and from one country to another.

The "reform" of the theatre came to an end some time ago. What follows? First let us note that it has left us good ground from which to start afresh—

today the stage is clear both of useless scenery, and costumes which are too faithful to historical detail or to fashion; we have gained a sharper style of décor and a better use of light, a more alert sense of rhythm, a way of acting from which rhetoric and detailed verisimilitude are proscribed—in short a much franker stage convention which respects the nature of the play without overburdening it, and which everywhere, in every style, seeks a deep human "realism"—a poetry of "reality", quite distinct from muddy "naturalism".

These results have been brought about in Western Europe mainly by a fresh approach to the presentation and interpretation of the classics, but in close touch with modern "realism."

The "reform" has brought also in its train some experiments in a new form of architecture—roughly sketched out in "Theatres in the Round" or "Arena"—which have taken shape here and in Scandinavia, in France and especially in Germany; their aim is to banish naturalistic or operatic illusion, and to enable their audience, sitting at their ease and concentrated in a compact body almost surrounding the stage, to feel they are everywhere close to the actors. The stage can be projected into the auditorium according to the needs of the play or the production. The flexibility of the forestage is a reflection of a period of transition: it can be adapted to the various conventions of the past and it invites experiment for the future.

Such is, in broad outline, the perspective in Western Europe—the heritage bequeathed by the producers of the past to those of today.

One hears a great deal just now about the falling-off of cinema audiences; it is even said that the sale of television sets is slowing down. A good opportunity, it would seem, for the Theatre to regain the road it has lost, which it still continues to lose, in the provinces if not in the big cities.

Yet for all that, we have grown up with the film, and television engages an ever-increasing number of viewers. Cinema, radio, and now television have contributed much more than the theatre to form the contemporary public, particularly the youthful public. What sort of influence have they had? Broadening, on the whole, I believe. It appears that drama or dramatised novels are the most popular items on television; the radio has broadcast a number of plays neglected by the Theatre. Moreover for years, and often still today, the film has offered the public a more faithful mirror of the times than the Theatre has: it has kept to the level of actuality; that is its weakness and its strength. Through film and television a vast public is discovering the aspect, the complexity and the evolution of a changing world.

Is this mass-audience, made up of all elements of the public, going to be ignored by the Theatre, while it isolates itself in a realm of culture belonging to the chosen few? Or is the Theatre going to draw to itself the largest public possible by a programme that will hold its interest in a spirit, and under conditions, that will continue to attract it?

Quite a new field of action is opening up for the producer of today provided he is ready to assume the responsibility for all aspects of a theatre policy and become the pioneer of a popular Theatre.

To say popular is not simply to imply elementary, but rather open and direct. The present-day public, curious, eager, likes to be enthralled; it seizes on the meaning of things: it needs contemporary works of all nationalities which have something to say about the life and destiny of modern man. Add to this a small proportion of classical works which, either by allusion or by contrast, have a bearing on the present day. The content of a play is from now on more important than any aesthetic attitude; matter triumphs over manner. Now, more than ever, the producer's only *raison d'être* is as the head of a team resolved to devote itself to serving the play.

But if one says popular one must also say plentiful. Authors are attracted and the public is held only if a great many plays are put on. Quantity, which necessarily entails error and failure, replaces the careful adjustments and calculations which yesterday seemed to us a condition of our efforts towards perfection.

Such a policy is full of risks: based on an economy of means, on a simple adaptable stage, with décor and costumes reduced to essentials, it will demand a frantic system of tours and transfers—in order to gain even a precarious security—if its financial basis is not sufficiently solid.

This may entail a lowering of standard—that is what happens to mass-production when it is insufficiently equipped—and those whom we call today by the significant name of perfectionists will be the first to complain.

Be that as it may, this problem, even if it is not new, is of prime importance. On its solution depends the artistic expression and consequently the vitality of such a policy. The more so, if it is to attract a wide public, the Theatre must recover the means of expression which used to belong to it. Radio, film and television have sobered, but impoverished, acting. Music-Hall and variety are disappearing. Gags, acrobatics, mime, dance, music, singing, spoken and sung choruses, the comedians' improvisations—the Theatre needs to make use of all these popular resources again, if it is to come into its own and be distinct from other forms of show. Gifted writers should be part of this world of invention and technique: it offers them exciting propositions from which to select and finally "compose" and they, in their turn, will bring to it the stimulus of their language and ideas. This close collaboration between authors, actors and technicians rarely comes about by chance: it alone can restore to the Theatre its explosive force.

There is no instance of a concerted artistic enterprise proving efficient and lasting if it does not concern itself with experiment and training: no studio, laboratory or school can have a healthy existence except beside a working theatre. In exchange for the protection it gives, such a theatre demands results. It

sanctions or condemns experiment and puts theories and speculations to the proof.

Finally it seems impossible to restore its impetus to the Theatre without saying a word about the buildings and the price of seats. The traditional Theatre architecture, which divides the public on different levels and commands the relationship between audience and stage, is out of date: it runs counter to the temper of present-day society and to modern aesthetics. The auditorium should always have sufficient seating capacity to make it possible to play for part of the time at popular prices, a condition essential for the recovery of a public which has become accustomed in the cinema to see and hear well from all parts of the house. But the construction of new theatres can only be successfully achieved if there is collaboration between architects and men of the theatre: producers, stage-directors and chief carpenters.

These needs of the modern theatre, far from being extravagant, are in fact, elementary and modest. Setting aside Russia and Brecht's "Ensemble" in Eastern Germany, most towns in Western Germany have their Theatre, housed in buildings which are necessarily modern and endowed with subsidies (often shared between State and Municipality) which allow the maintenance of permanent companies of actors whose contracts last from one to five years. Schools are attached to the principal theatres. This kind of organised theatre in Germany, whose technical equipment may sometimes be overpowering, is an example which must not be ignored. It may have influenced France who has just established a comparable ensemble in the town of Strasbourg, but how much less richly endowed! Wherever an experiment in popular theatre has been tried in France, it has by degrees built up a new public; but often under conditions that are too harsh both for the audience and the artistes. It has also failed to provide the young with the elementary resources which enable them to try out their talents.

The popular movement in the Theatre has made a promising start: to progress, it will need further initiative, care and, naturally, money. This year in France it is obliged to mark time.

The English Theatre has a popular tradition; has it the daring and the means to develop it?

THEATRE BOOKS PUBLISHED

- PLAY PARADE, Vol V by Noel Coward. Heinemann. 25s.
THE BEST SHORT PLAYS 1955-56. Edited by Margaret Mayorga. Mayflower. 10s.
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