THERE'S STILL LIFE IN THE OLD GAL

Can theater cure itself? City Center might take a tip from Piscator's New School Theater Workshop.

By ISIDOR SCHNEIDER

As FAR back as I can remember, in my reading about the theater, that institution, like poetry, has been dying, or even dead. The autopsies continue—and the theater lingers on.

The phenomenon has a simple enough explanation. The theater is undeniably sick, but with the sickness that afflicts the whole of capitalist culture. It can be diagnosed only from an organic view. Even problems seemingly specific to the theater can only be fully understood in the full context of the capitalist culture within which it operates.

A laboratory demonstration of the interconnection was furnished during the depression decade. Then the theater collapsed as flat as the stockmarket. I remember how positively all the doctors of the drama pronounced it dead. Yet it came through, limping and feeble—but it came through.

I am using the word "theater" here in the limited concept which regards the real-estate-dominated and speculation-motivated output of Broadway as its core. A theater in which real estate holdings and financial speculation are decisive is in a sick social relationship, to begin with.

Living organisms, when attacked by disease, raise up antibodies against it. Our sick theater has been carried through its crises by the aid and influence of antibodies which have supported a peripheral dramatic art, some of whose vitality has flowed over to the diseased part. These antibodies have sustained taste, and held audiences for serious drama when the theater seemed finally reduced to gag and leg.

Here I set down a far from complete list of the rescuing antibodies. It would include the old Washington Square Players, now practically fossilized in the Theater Guild; the vanished Provincetown Players, the Cherry Lane Players and the Laboratory Theater. Then there was the influence of the neighboring Yiddish theater, the Artef, and visiting groups like the Moscow Art Theater, the Chauve Souris, the Habimah, the Vilna Troupe

and, today, England's flourishing antibody, the Old Vic.

In the depression decade, when Broadway was flattest, the antibodies were most active. They included, above all, the Federal Theater Projects, which were themselves stimulated and influenced by the theater sections of the left-wing cultural movement—the Theater Union, the Group Theater, TAC, the International Ladies Garment Workers group that produced Pins and Needles, and, at a remove, Eva Le Gallienne's Civic Repertory Theater.

In the war years the need to mobilize the interests and emotions of the people, something which Broadway, like the films, normally seeks to anesthetize, brought about a comparative receptivity to serious plays. There has been a spillover into this postwar year. But the need for antibodies continues. And we find them in operation.

At this moment the two most visible ones are Stage for Action, which is in its own reconversion throes, finding peacetime tasks to match its wartime contribution, and Erwin Piscator's Theater Workshop.

IN THE functioning of the sick theater's antibodies, three elements have been important. If we examine the Soviet theater and other national theaters in their most fulfilled periods, these elements appear to be the essentials of a healthy theater. One, particularly in modern times, is relevant social content, the major contribution of the Theater Union and the Group Theater, and the weakening of which, in the latter, was one of the factors in its dissolution. The second is a cooperative, or at any rate, integrated playing company, which was achieved briefly and resplendently in New York by the Washington Square and the Provincetown Players in the boom period, and by the Group Theater during the depression. The third is a repertory, most consistently followed through in the Civic Repertory Thea-

Thus, with different emphases on

one or another, all three elements have been a factor in the activity of the antibodies. It was their serious, though fumbling, search for significant content that distinguished the Provincetown Players, and the relaxation of that search contributed to their decline.

But the antibodies, themselves, were subject to the conditions of the disease. Its low admission scale prevented the Civic Repertory Theater, for example, from building a good enough company, a company of the quality of the Old Vic, or the famous Russian companies. The Group Theater's far better company, on the other hand, was raided by Broadway and Hollywood for its actors. This was not, as we have already noted, the sole reason for its disintegration, but one of the several pressures that combined to break it.

The three life-giving elements are present in Erwin Piscator's Theater Workshop of the New School for Social Research, with acting company unity as the least developed. The Workshop is a student-actor organization, and the acting is affected, besides, by the need to provide all the students with roles. The unity in the company comes mainly from the direction which is supplied by the workshop's gifted and experienced head, Erwin Piscator, one of the great theater artists of our time. The social content in its repertory, apart from the director's skill which accomplishes so much with a tiny stage, home-made properties and untrained actors, is the theater's chief distinction.

I NDER the title of "The March of Drama" the repertory has been conceived as a means of illustrating the history of world drama. In it China is represented with The Chalk Circle, a play of peasant revolt; ancient Greece with Aristophanes' anti-war satire, Lysistrata; France with Moliere's comedy on the emergent bourgeoisie, The Imaginary Invalid; old Russia by two one-act plays by Chekhov and Gorky, the first a sardonic portrayal of upper-class "miseries," the other, in contrast, a tragic revelation of peasant life turning on the theft of a few ounces of sugar; Soviet Russia with Pogodin's The Aristocrats, dealing with the rehabilitation of antisocial people through useful work; Germany with Hannele's Way to Heaven by Gerhart Hauptmann, which deals with the psychological mutilations of poverty but is spoiled by mysticism (this seems to me an aspect of the no-



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torious opportunism of its author, who found it possible to accept Nazi honors); Elizabethan England by Shakespeare's Twelfth Night; modern England by Shaw's Androcles and the Lion, with its insights into the revolutionary beginnings of Christianity; Italy by Pirandello's Tonight We Improvise, and America by Eugene O'Neill's Mourning Becomes Electra, discussed in a previous issue of New Masses, and the premiere of a new play soon to be produced.

There are certain omissions in that list that occur at once. Why no representation of the English Restoration satires, or one of Sheridan's? Why not Gogol's Inspector General? But whether or not such alternatives would have proved practicable or preferable, the repertory is certainly rich enough, considering the handicaps under which the theater operates.

On analysis, as already indicated, the repertory, with two exceptions, is a forcible demonstration of social content in the classic theater. The exceptions are Twelfth Night and Tonight We Improvise. But in the latter, probably the best play about players ever written, there is social content, too, for those who can make their own inferences from the revelations of actors' psychology and the stage conventions satirized during the unconventional course of the play.

Its social content, in fact, is the major source of interest in this repertory—rich testimony from the history of drama to confute the Broadway libel upon the theater that its purpose is to supply sedatives and distractions.

From the standpoint of production Tonight We Improvise was outstandingly the most successful. The direction admirably caught the offguard, intimately self-revelatory aspects of the actor's life intended by the author; and in the very inexperience of the actors there was a spontaneity that had a special effectiveness.

From the standpoint of social content, however, the most interesting play of the Workshop's season is Pogodin's The Aristocrats. Here is a play which is directly and consciously a thesis piece, a piece for an occasion. The occasion is past but, unlike most plays done for an occasion, The Aristocrats has survived it. Important lessons are therefore to be learned from this significant success, in that much debated field of art as direct propaganda.

The play deals with the building by

convicts of the Baltic-White Sea Canal, which proved of immense economic importance in peace and equal military importance in war. Murmansk's value as a supply port lay in its situation as the northern terminus of the canal.

The construction constituted two feats of engineering. One was the special engineering feat of building locks, dams and sluices through a rocky, icy Northern wilderness; the other was the still more extraordinary feat of social engineering — remaking former ordinary criminals and former engineersaboteurs into useful builders.

The immediate characters of the play are two groups of "aristocrats," engineers from among the unreconciled, pre-revolutionary intelligentsia who plan to continue their sabotage on the canal construction, and the underworld "artists" who refuse to soil their hands with work.

Pogodin carries them through their slow evolution into the socialist collective. He shows the appeals and challenges to creative feelings and the social pressures of the transformed community working upon the aristocrats and gradually taking effect. It is a tribute to the skill of the author that the changes of two years flow through the stage's two hours with a continuity like that of life itself.

A study of Pogodin's script should be immensely rewarding to the social playwright. What was obvious, even at the comparatively surface level of watching a performance, is that the portrayals are self-consistent; therefore the points they make are immensely effective because they have that most convincing credibility of portrayals which continue in character while making their points.

This is particularly important and effective here because of the very content of the play. Since it deals with "human engineering" it was as necessary to be as accurate about human properties and conditions as about the conditions and properties of the rock strata to be excavated.

It is Pogodin's achievement that he does this entirely in terms of character evolution. Charts and sociological language could have served too, but on a lower artistic level. Pogodin gives us the doubts, resistance, rebellions, conflicts, hysterias, hopes, ruses, wit, defiances, elations and depressions, all the complexities in the souls of engineers who have lived double lives, and the gangster leaders who have lived by their wits in two worlds. Pogodin

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ALL WORK MUST BE SENT DI-RECTLY TO: URBAN LEAGUE, 208 Mack Ave., Detroit, Michigan makes use of these subtleties and conflicts for dramatic subtleties and conflicts. As Pogodin presents it, the reclamation of these "aristocrats" comes not by a simple erasure of the old and imposition of the new, but by a gradual rearrangement of their qualities, such as enables them to mesh into the surrounding social mechanism.

The production, on the whole, was good. By the visible manipulation of simple screens, on which colored photographic backgrounds were projected, the production itself helped to give a sense of the construction that is the chief point of the play. The acting was capable and well unified. But the use of a chorus chanting the slogans and statistics that Pogodin himself never resorted to is an intrusion. It is not in the script and was not in the Moscow performance I happened to see. But though it is an intrusion, this minor American addition was certainly not enough to spoil the production. There can be no question but that, of the contemporary plays shown in New York this year, this Soviet play is the best.

NEW YORK desperately needs a repertory theater. One has only to see the workshop productions to see the potentialities of such a company; and to see the magnificent offerings of the Old Vic for those potentialities in comparative fulfilment. For New York the Workshop is a lucky stopgap. But it could become so much more. It is a pity that a theater that manages to say so much is so muted in its expression by the handicaps of a stage too small and antiquated, and by other insufficiencies. It seems to me there is an opportunity here for the City Center to provide auditorium and audience for a repertory company of real proportions, directed by Piscator.

Since its inception the City Center has been a stage looking for a function. Its offerings have done it little credit, have shown no enterprise, no imagination, no plan. Why not serve, as the Old Vic does for England, as the vivifying antibody for the sick American theater?

Why not let Mr. Piscator build a company from the unused talent abundant in this town, for a full-time repertory that can extend his vivid history of the world drama? This could become one of the acting companies that are the most vital need of our theater. It could serve that large, waiting audience that has always shown itself ready

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The Old Vic

HIS review might serve as a long and cheerful footnote to the article above. The Old Vic, on whose production of Henry IV, Part Two, I will re-report here, is in New York as the guest of Theater Incorporated, producers of the successful current revival of Pygmalion. In the program notes this production of Pygmalion is announced as their first move toward a repertory company along the lines of the Old Vic. Plans for the coming season include three productions, not yet finally chosen, from plays by Gogol, Goldoni, Ibsen, Middleton, O'Casey, Shakespeare and Synge, and a new play. The same program also carries an advertisement of the American Repertory Theater, to be inaugurated in the Fall with a series of plays by Barrie, Ibsen, Shaw and Sheridan, and a new play. Since at least one of these groups is proceeding in conscious emulation of the Old Vic, the opportunity to see this deservedly famous model, now on view at the New Century Theater, should not be missed.

Its production of *Henry IV*, Part Two (I have not yet seen Part One), is well worth emulating. With Ralph Richardson as Falstaff and Laurence Olivier as Justice Shallow, the comic in this great historical drama would seem to overweigh the historical. But though there is no individual acting to equal Richardson's and Olivier's among those portraying the historical personages, there is a dignity and grandeur in the direction and the settings that serves to strike a balance.

Performance, directing and mounting of the play have an authenticity that no American production of Shakespeare that I have seen has had. It may come, in large part, from its being a native production. But I am inclined to believe that it is also, in large part, the fruit of the repertory idea, the accumulated experience of the sixty years that the Old Vic collective has been producing Shakespeare.

In the directorial tempo there is remarkable subtlety of modulations and contrasts and seldom have I seen lovelier compositions in the settings, costumes and the placing and carriage of the actors. Some of the scenes had the effect of Renaissance paintings in motion.

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All I have to find fault with is the sometimes excessive gesturings and turnings of the actors, deprecatorily called "mugging," which tends to muffle their speech. This is probably a greater drawback here than in England, where historical allusions are immediately caught and where there is no obstacle of an unfamiliar accent. It took me some twenty minutes to accustom myself to the British accent to the point where I could hear the words without straining.

Reading through the program notes it was instructive to learn that the Old Vic, now so glittering and accepted an ornament of British culture, is the product of a social reformer's determination to bring Shakespeare to the London slums. London's poor helped to sustain the Old Vic for many years before Mayfair condescended to acknowledge its existence. Still more significant, its present widespread activities are made possible by that Communistic menace, a financial guarantee from the government, through the National Arts Council. The council itself derives from the wartime, moralesustaining CEMA (Committee for the Encouragement of Music and Art). These at first volunteer, and later government-sponsored collective activities have given a stimulus to British culture that it has not known for years.

Today the Old Vic operates theaters in London, Bristol and Liverpool. It trains its own actors, who make their debut in the Old Vic's children's theater company. It also maintains an experimental stage. Thus the Old Vic is something not merely for the American Repertory Theater and Theater Incorporated to emulate. It, and the British National Arts Committee which sponsors it—not to speak of the still more highly developed theaters of Socialist Russia—are examples to all America.

I. S.

Youth Theater Alumni

The pre-war Flatbush Art Theater, which grew into the American Youth Theater and then disbanded for the duration, is back again as the Youth Theater Alumni. It is presenting a variety show Saturday nights at New York's Barbizon-Plaza Theater which it calls Tid-Bits of '46. Some of the old faces are gone: Betty Garrett is the life of Call Me Mister; Buddy Yarus, as George Tine, is out in Hollywood, snaring an occasional juicy role as in Walk in the Sun, etc. But

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