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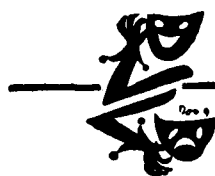
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## BROADWAY POSTSCRIPT

### The On-Brechtian Theatre

**A** PLAYWRIGHT is really to be judged on the ability of his writing to come alive in a theatre. His theories, his original conceptions, his careful construction, his beautiful poetry may be precious in themselves, but in the theatre they are worthless unless someone makes them work on a stage in front of people.

Since in the theatre things often succeed for the wrong reasons, the wise director and translator is the one who best knows the limitations of his actors and the temper of his audience. Thus it was that until Marc Blitzstein's very free adaptation of "The Threepenny Opera," the translated plays of Bertolt Brecht never enjoyed any popular success in New York.

Now Brecht is having his second smash hit, not with one of his major works, but with an off-Broadway evening titled "Brecht on Brecht," which the distinguished playwright George Tabori has pasted together out of scraps of Brecht's writing and scratchy tape recordings of the late playwright singing and talking. These scraps, translated by Mr. Tabori and others, and delivered by six performers in mufti, occasionally give us flashes of Brecht's true and enigmatic personality, but primarily they are excerpts that these performers can make emotionally stirring or sharply humorous with effective variety.

The production's greatest asset is Lotte Lenya, who knew Brecht well enough to perform him without awe. Miss Lenya appears to have no more acting technique than a girl who gets up to sing at a party. But her capacity for zest in performance is unsurpassed in our theatre. With her, songs do not seem chores, but joyous opportunities for rediscovery of wonder and truth. Even as the demented scrubwoman who sings her paranoiac revenge upon society in "Black Freighter," Miss Lenya gives us the full flavor of the sadness behind the hatred, rather than pathological or sociological pathos.

The others in the cast have their moments, too, though not very Brechtian ones. There is Viveca Lindfors as a Jewish wife leaving Nazi Germany and showing us her self-pity by fighting it back; George Voscovec as her dutiful non-Jewish husband drawing a nice portrait of an intellectual giant trying to delude himself that he is not, as most humans are, a moral pygmy; Anne

Jackson's narration of an infanticide which is eloquent in direct proportion to the restraint of sentimental moralizing with which she is able to tell it; Dane Clark's humorous description of a minor actor taking major pains choosing the right hat for a small role; and Michael Wager's amusing air of self-revelation as he sings of the comic futility of remaining an "eternal student."

Inevitably, some of the selections miss being in their full context, and suffer from their lack of dramatic urgency. And while director Gene Frankel has carpentered the proceedings tightly, there is no demonstration of the kind of directorial genius that many consider Brecht's most important achievement. Furthermore, one asks himself if the sort of extroverted individual performance Joseph Buloff is currently giving in "A Chekhov Sketchbook" might not be more appropriate, and if this kind of program is not in-



deed an insufficient substitute for the real thing. On the other hand, perhaps this unambitious and relaxed style of presentation is needed to disarm a potentially hostile audience, and Miss Lenya's performance alone is worth the price of admission.

Off Off-Broadway at Brooklyn College's Gershwin Theatre, Eric Bentley, who as a critic has done more for Brecht than anyone (see his introduction to the newly published "Seven Plays by Bertolt Brecht"), recently presented "An Evening of Brecht." With gritty determination Mr. Bentley amazed and delighted his audience by playing Brecht songs on both organ and piano, and singing them not only well but with an unequivocal ferocity that was in itself dramatic and emotionally charged. His comments between songs were surprisingly nonacademic and gently humorous, suggesting perhaps that Mr. Bentley is coming to understand Brecht, now that Martin Esslin has explained him to him.

—HENRY HEWES.



## An End to Laissez-Faire?

**C**HAIRMAN NEWTON N. MINOW and his six associates on the FCC are presumably pondering a most important decision: Should they affirm or reverse the order of one of the regulatory agency's hearing examiners in the significant Palmetto Broadcasting Company case (WDKD, Kingstree, South Carolina). As reported here (SR, July 1, 1961), the commission had some doubts about renewing the small radio station's license last year, and it directed that a hearing be held locally in the agricultural community. Initially, the issue was whether or not E. G. Robinson, Jr., owner of WDKD, had permitted a disc jockey to broadcast, over a period of years, "coarse, vulgar, suggestive, indecent, double-meaning" program material. After FCC field investigations, other issues were added which questioned the applicant's "lack of candor and misrepresentation of fact," "adequate control and supervision of programs," and the manner in which he had met the needs of his community. The hearings were held last spring; and recently the initial decision of Thomas H. Donahue, the hearing examiner, was released to the public. He found that in the WDKD record there had indeed been program smut, misrepresentation, "execrable judgment," "horrendous over-commercialization," "character deficiency and bad past operation."

There were witnesses at the hearing for and against Mr. Robinson on the smut issue. He was stoutly supported by leading businessmen, local officials, and a few schoolmen on the issue of "meeting the needs of the community." The licensee was personally repentant, and promised to do better if his application for renewal were granted. The hearing examiner opined that, apart from the obscenity lapse, the station owner (who also runs two farms and a liquor store) was "not a venal man . . . or a congenital liar" but "typical of a type of American businessman . . . with financial success as his goal." In arriving at his decision the examiner sympathetically presented a battery of arguments which could have rationalized a "conditional renewal" of the applicant's license. Nevertheless, at the end of his merciful trail of reasoning, Mr. Donahue found no alternative but to order Mr. Robinson's application for renewal denied. He predicted that if the seven

commissioners should affirm his decision, the broadcasting industry would interpret their action as "one of a series of events signaling abandonment by the commission of a laissez-faire policy of regulation in the field of programming. . . ."

Strong voices in the trade have expressed the hope that the FCC will affirm. They would invite a crucial test in the courts of the issues involved—whether broadcasting comes under the First Amendment; whether the obscenity test for TV should be different from related tests for print and films; and whether the commission has the right to set broad program standards. The FCC ought to affirm the order and welcome the court review. Most informed observers think the Palmetto ruling would stand in the courts and that it would indeed signal a new regulatory era in broadcasting. It would indicate, among other things, that the meeting of local audience desires by a broadcaster is not an exclusive criterion for public service. Local sentiment, Mr. Donahue suggests in his decision, may be "placed in the scales with national interest and found wanting." Paternalism, it will be argued in the trade, is the correct name for this regulatory philosophy—but it should be remembered that the broadcasting system in this country is based on social responsibility *privately* defined and *voluntarily* accepted by the broadcasters.

The broadcasting woods (especially radio) are full of operators who are not necessarily "venal," but whose level of sophistication, at the controls of powerful communications forces, is almost illiterate. They are broadcasters in name only and not in the spirit of professionalism. Some operate stations as tax losses or they buy and sell them for quick turnover. Examiner Donahue commented: "The Commission is not in the business of reforming the morals of American businessmen." The industry, however, has some stake in such reform; and perhaps through its National Association of Broadcasters it can intensify self-educational measures leading, among *all* broadcasters, to "a more intelligent understanding and discerning application of the spirit of the law. . . ." Mr. Robinson's personal loss might then become the industry's collective gain—an irony but nonetheless a public service.

—ROBERT LEWIS SHAYON.

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