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978-0-521-29196-5 - Erwin Piscator's Political Theatre: The Development of Modern German Drama

C. D. Innes

Excerpt

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Introduction

There is considerable confusion today as to the proper function of the theatre. Its rôle in society, its relationship to the public and even its validity as an art form are questioned, since when reality is ignored or significant trends of thought are not reflected, art falls into disrepute. Traditionally the stage has been seen as a mirror of the world. But the individual actor is its prime constituent, which limits it to the particular, while the essentials of twentieth-century existence are abstract: power resides in bureaucracies not kings, and conflicts are between masses not duellists. This means that the theatre appears incapable of dealing with the significant aspects of life at a time when the demand is for relevance. Technology has created a new vision of the world. The internal combustion engine and the aeroplane have led to expectations of a comprehensive treatment of complex subjects, while radio and television have established new standards of immediacy and actuality. As a result conventional theatre has been relegated to 'entertainment' and there has been a tendency among *avant-garde* intellectuals (Abbie Hoffman is an example) to dismiss all formal definitions of drama. Such a rejection, however, is unjustified. The last fifty years have seen the transformation of stage conventions through a continual process of experimentation, ranging from the ritualism of Artaud or Grotowski and the formalized abstraction of the Bauhaus to the politically oriented theories of Meyerhold or Brecht. On the one hand there has been a retreat to 'pure' art, theatre for theatre's sake, on the other an attempt to adapt drama to the modern context, but in either case developments have been determined by a new awareness of the physical resources of the stage and its relationship to the audience.

It is normal to date modern drama from Ibsen, although Naturalism was actually the final phase of traditional theatre; but it is more accurate to take the Dada movement as the starting-point of these attempts to find theatrical correlatives for the new consciousness. It

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has been more a question of techniques than material, since the means of expression determine the range of possible subjects – and for this reason the major innovations have been the work of directors rather than playwrights. One of these, whose experiments have been seminal in the development of new stage-forms, is Erwin Piscator; and his productions which affected every aspect of the theatre offer an opportunity for evaluating the validity of the stage as a forum for contemporary society.

Anticipating Marshall McLuhan in his appreciation of the rôle played by technology in determining modern vision, Piscator introduced mass-media to the stage in order to make the theatre capable of handling twentieth-century issues. This raised certain basic questions about the nature of drama. The political situation immediately following the First World War discredited cultural traditions in Germany and prevented any compromise with former artistic conventions for reflecting society. Reacting against aesthetic criteria, Piscator attempted to represent current events or recent history in a direct manner, which necessitated reappraising the relative importance of the various elements of drama and spotlighted the difficulties of adaptation. His extensive use of mechanical aids drew notice to the balance between literary texts and theatrical performances and forced a re-evaluation of the part played by the actor vis-à-vis stage-effects and scenery, while his emphasis on recorded speech and documented fact focused attention on the author's position in reducing him from an imaginative creator to an organizer of given material. This led to a reassessment of the part played by the audience, exploring the different possibilities for imaginative receptivity, objective distancing or emotional participation.

Piscator, overshadowed by his contemporary Brecht, has been generally neglected. But his work provided models and standards for all *théâtre engagé*, shaping Communist propaganda plays, forming the distinctive elements of Brecht's dramaturgy and influencing Joan Littlewood, Roger Planchon and the American Living Newspaper as well as his German contemporaries. His career spans the whole period from 1919 to the plays of Hochhuth, Weiss and Kipphardt in the last decade, and his experiments were responsible for the major modern stage-forms of 'Agitprop' plays, 'Documentary Drama' and 'Total Theatre'. His ideas are still gaining influence, and the effect of his experiments can be seen today in

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London, New York and Toronto as well as Berlin. His productions were consciously intended to provide examples which would frame practical foundations for a new kind of drama, and the sources of the dramaturgical forms that came from his work can be traced by following his personal involvement in Dada and his commitment to Communism.

Born in 1893, Piscator gained his experience in conventional production as a student at the court theatre in pre-war Munich, as an actor in an army theatre group where he played stock parts in popular comedy from 1917 until he was demobilized, and as a director when he opened the Central-Theater with Hans José Rehfisch in opposition to the Volksbühne. His involvement in politics was equally important. When he arrived in Berlin in 1918 Wieland Herzfelde, with whom he had acted during the war, introduced him to the Marxist core of the Dada movement, and in an emotional reaction to the murder of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg after the abortive Spartacist revolt he joined the Communist Party.

The contrast between the Flanders front line and the assumptions behind the entertainment put on for the troops led Piscator to reject the traditions of Western culture and to demand relevance in art. Dada, with its iconoclasm and its standards of active involvement and verisimilitude, confirmed this view. But by its nature the movement was incapable of establishing coherent artistic principles and when Piscator founded his first theatre, *Das Tribunal*, at Königsberg in 1919, his radicalism was limited in practical terms to Expressionist plays like Strindberg's *Ghost Sonata*. However, returning to a politically tense situation in Berlin and without funds, he went back to the first principles of drama when he opened his *Proletarisches Theater* in 1920, playing without a proper stage, costumes or lighting, in the meeting halls of industrial districts, and relying on amateur, working-class actors. The short scripts he produced under such conditions, designed to make an immediate propaganda impact, initiated the Agitprop movement in Germany and formed the basis of his mature work. Four years later he returned to this political type of theatre with all the resources of the professional stage, producing two propaganda revues designed for specific occasions, *The Red Revue* and *Despite All!*, which provided alternative dramatic models to conventional plays and set the form

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for all subsequent Agitprop performances. Normal artistic criteria were inapplicable to these experiments, which contained qualities that Piscator was to develop into the conflicting genres of Documentary and Total Theatre, and their major significance was to force a complete re-examination of drama's function and the relationship of the stage to society.

Relevance and political meaning were not enough for Piscator, who experimented with various ways of representing the modern environment. In 1919 he had attempted to rewrite Toller's *Transfiguration* as a vehicle for depicting reality according to his own war experiences, but Das Tribunal closed before it could be put on. When he first took over a proper stage in 1922, the Central-Theater, he tried a dirt-and-degradation extreme of Naturalism, and the climax of his 1928 production of *The Adventures of the Good Soldier Schweik* approached the vicious commonplaces of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* movement. He later referred to the three plays that he staged in the Central-Theater as a regression. But apart from winning critical recognition which made the next step of his career possible since he was offered a position as a guest director at the Volksbühne, these conventional productions were in line with his development. It was this impulse to realism that led initially to his use of film in stage productions – first for *Despite All!* in 1925 and Paquet's play, *Tidal Wave*, at the Volksbühne in 1926, then in all his most significant work.

Fusing film into a dramatic action was Piscator's decisive innovation. Backed by exposed and elaborate machinery it acted as a correlative for the modern context as well as gaining a new level of authenticity. But with simultaneous stages, symbolic acting constructs and such equipment as the 'treadmill' constructed for *Schweik*, film also altered the nature of the theatre. It allowed an apparent liberation from the temporal and spatial limitations of the stage and made it possible to shift viewpoints, so that the action could be extended to global scope and gained the 'epic' ability to comment on itself. It was film too, though Piscator preferred to give political reasons, which enforced a redefinition of the actor's function, and its intrinsic qualities reacted as a catalyst on the other elements of performance, setting new standards of precision, actuality and impersonality for sound effects, movements, scenery and particularly speech.

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To make appropriate film sequences for his productions, to train actors to conform with the new conditions, to compose incidental music suitable for the mechanical nature of his stage and to provide scripts which he could use, Piscator – who had opened his own theatre in September 1927 – founded a teaching studio. This brought every aspect of drama under his direct control, which made it possible for him to produce practical examples of the ways modern technology could represent contemporary existence in its range and complexity, opening fresh areas of experience to the stage and providing it with new means of expression.

The five years between his appointment to the Volksbühne in 1924 and the closing of the Piscator-Bühne was the most fruitful period of Piscator's career, culminating in four brilliant productions, *Hoppla*, *We are Alive!* by Toller, Alexei Tolstoy's *Rasputin*, *Schweik* which broke box office records with Max Pallenberg in the title rôle, and Leo Lania's *Economic Competition (Konjunktur)*. These were complex productions, combining the most extreme elements of Total Theatre with fully developed documentary techniques; contradictory innovations which were only later developed into antithetical types of dramaturgy for Piscator formulated his theory by observing the effects of his practice. This makes it impossible for any sequential account of his career to do justice to his work, particularly since his techniques raise so many basic questions about the nature of drama.

By any standards the Piscator-Bühne productions were successful: they dealt with political issues in a comprehensive and appropriate way, returned the stage to its Schillerian position as a moral tribunal, provoked a public discussion about the nature of art, influenced contemporary playwrights and directors, and acted as a truly representative social forum, attracting the artistic and wealthy as well as proletarian organizations. Yet they failed the basic test of theatre – survival. Each of Piscator's ventures was short-lived, which was partly due to his constant experimentation and his exorbitant use of machinery, but mainly the result of the situation in the Weimar Republic. Such radical experiments naturally aroused artistic and political opposition, making Piscator a lightning-conductor for scandal. His Dadaist principles and the criticism of local figures in a play programme had incited a riot which caused the Königsberg authorities to close Das Tribunal. A flagrant

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disregard for the author's rights in rewriting Ehm Welk's *Storm over Gottland* as Marxist propaganda split the Volksbühne and raised a vicious critical battle in the press which resulted in his dismissal as a guest director. *Rasputin* led to libel suits by the ex-Kaiser and a Russian financier, his version of *Schweik* broke copyright laws, and he was prosecuted on a criminal charge of blasphemy for Grosz's satiric cartoons. Financial pressures added to his difficulties. Economic depression closed the Central-Theater; and the popularity of *Schweik* paradoxically bankrupted the first Piscator-Bühne when a second theatre had to be hired to fulfill obligations to the subscription organization.

But in the final analysis it was Piscator's transformation of the theatre into a political institution, bringing the stage into the ideological arena and intensifying the political situation, which caused his difficulties and closed the second Piscator-Bühne in 1929. Resurgent Nationalism protested against Walter Mehring's treatment of the Jewish problem in *The Merchant of Berlin*, and there was a violent revulsion to one scene in which a street-cleaner, singing 'Muck – Away with it!' swept up the corpse of a soldier lying in the gutter. Piscator, relying on his acting troupe rather than machinery, continued his development of techniques to depict modern realities, but in January 1931, after the success of Karl Credé's *§ 218* which attacked the criminal code on the issue of abortion, Piscator was arrested on a trumped-up charge of tax evasion, while Credé was imprisoned for illegally procuring abortions. Both were released a month later after a public outcry, but Piscator left for Russia later in the same year, and his acting troupe, who also went on tour abroad after police action, finally disbanded in June 1932.

For Piscator the concept of 'political theatre' embraced socio-logical issues in their broadest definition and he had to defend his productions continually against ideological attacks from Communist critics. While in the U.S.S.R. he directed one production, which was banned at the dress-rehearsal, and filmed Anna Segher's novel, *The Revolt of the Fishermen*, which was suppressed. He was elected secretary of the International Revolutionary Theatre Association in 1934, an organization of Agitprop troupes which he expanded to coordinate the various efforts of all left-wing and liberal theatre groups, but left Moscow for Paris in 1936. Here he

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worked with Alfred Neumann on his first version of *War and Peace*, which he eventually produced at New York in 1942. He left for the U.S.A. in 1938 and worked at the Dramatic Workshop of the New School for Social Research, directing over a hundred plays, establishing a theatre centre which trained a whole generation of American actors and playwrights including Marlon Brando and Tennessee Williams, and encouraging the development of off-Broadway stages. He only returned to Europe in 1951 when summoned to appear before the Committee on Un-American Activities, although East Berlin had approached him through Brecht, who invited him to direct Nordahl Grieg's *The Defeat* (later transformed into *Die Tage der Commune*) in the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm. But Brecht's letter, written from Zürich in March 1949, contained a warning:

You would be received with the greatest warmth, and everybody will understand completely if you were somewhat uncommitted at first and stepped around the china shop with a certain caution. I myself have not spoken publicly, never, have not expressed myself publicly at all but simply gone on with my work

– and Piscator, whose exit from the U.S.S.R. has been described as 'fugitive', had no wish to work under a Communist dictatorship again. For the next decade he lived from hand to mouth as a freelance director in the Bundesrepublik, and this restricted his influence on the development of post-war drama since he lacked a fixed base, a trained ensemble and often the machinery he required. But in this period he brought his style to a new precision with two simple innovations, setting part of the acting area aside as a 'Stage of Fate' and lighting the stage from beneath through a glass floor to integrate individual characters into the wider patterns of historical events; and in 1962 when he was appointed director of the Freie Volksbühne in West Berlin a young playwright submitted his first script, which Piscator recognized as the type of drama for which his productions in the twenties had been designed. This 'epic play, epic-scientific, epic-documentary, a play for the epic, "political" theatre for which I have fought for thirty years; a "total" play for a "total" theatre' – as he described it in a foreword he wrote for its publication – was *The Deputy* by Rolf

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Hochhuth, and its production in February 1963 marked the foundation of a new dramatic genre.

Hochhuth's second play, *The Soldiers*, was written specifically for Piscator's stage and dedicated to him, but Piscator died before the text was fit for rehearsal. In 1964 and 1965 Piscator worked with Heinar Kipphardt and Peter Weiss, and since then the leading German dramatists have all written plays which show his influence – even unlikely authors, satirists like Günther Grass whose study of Brecht, *The Plebians Rehearse the Uprising*, appeared in 1966, or Absurdist like Tancred Dorst whose portrayal of individual commitment in a revolutionary situation, *Toller*, was produced in 1968.

This new drama was the fulfilment of Piscator's work, designed as it was to encourage playwrights to deal with the significant issues of contemporary existence by developing techniques to open up new subject matter for the stage. The German dramatic tradition and the atmosphere of the Weimar Republic gave him an incentive and certain advantages, and his direct influence is most obvious in modern German plays. But his experiments are not only of interest to students of German literature, although his career does provide a guideline to the development of German drama. His productions raise questions which are significant for the contemporary theatre as a whole – the relative claims of utilitarian and aesthetic principles, the criteria of relevance and the limits of theatrical realism, the value of classical revivals, the use of evidence (Documentary Theatre) as against imagination, the effectiveness of audience-involvement (Total Theatre) or distancing (Epic Theatre), and the nature of propaganda. His work records the effect of modern conditions on stage conventions, illuminates the nature of drama as literature or a synaesthetic performance, and provides a basis for critical standards to replace those which, drawn from traditional plays, are no longer applicable.

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1 *The Weimar Republic: Art and Environment*

German theatre: the break with tradition

Cultures can be defined by the continuity of their artistic tradition, and the development of a civilization is reflected in the continual modification of artistic conventions. These not only echo any alteration in the way men see themselves, so that art conforms to changing conditions, but also adjust the picture of man's relationship to his world. The history of art is a chronicle of perception; an archive of changes of vision recording the self-appraisal of the individual in the context of his environment as the accepted views of reality are modified by major scientific or mechanical advances which increase man's control over his physical surroundings. Even in the fine arts, periods of stylistic experiment follow significant technical innovations in order to discover a fresh visual order that is capable of expressing the new approach to reality in terms of linear design, colour and texture. Developments within a civilization are more obvious in the theatre than in any other art form, since – unlike painting or literature – the speaking and acting man is its primary means of communication. Human relationships are its basic material, and these are portrayed against a representation of environment which depends for its form on the adaptation of the available technology to the stage. The theatre therefore becomes a seismograph recording changes of consciousness.

Up to the twentieth century the traditional heritage of philosophy and ethics maintained its authority in European civilization through a process of gradual transformation. With the First World War, however, there came a dramatic expansion of horizons, an increase of knowledge and an acceleration in the tempo of life. Since then the speed of change has constantly superseded modes of vision before they could be accepted and form the basis of a new tradition of artistic expression. As a result contemporary art is eclectic; characterized by violent and impermanent stylistic revolutions. These are generally, like Dada, Futurism or Panderma, of

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aggressive modernity and take novelty and originality as their criteria. Alternatively, dramatists as different as Brecht and T. S. Eliot have made comparable attempts to form images appropriate to our age from fragments of extinct conventions – one has borrowed techniques from the Greek, Chinese and pre-Elizabethan stages, eighteenth-century operetta, nineteenth-century music hall and Chaplin's films, modelling his speech forms variously on the Bible, the Japanese Haiku and pseudo-American slang. The other has shored fragments of Kyd, de Nerval and Dante against his ruin, and made use of Sophocles, Euripides, medieval mysteries and drawing-room comedy.

Already at the end of the nineteenth century we can trace the intuition that tradition was breaking up under the pressure of social change. But the necessity of finding new artistic methods for ordering reality first became compelling as the Great War dragged into its final phase and the social order in the defeated lands – Russia, followed by the Germanic Alliance – disintegrated. In England the abdication of the old order was neither immediate nor obvious. In Germany, however, the sudden collapse of the Prussian régime brought its cultural values and traditions, already discredited by the war, into open disrepute. By 1919 Germany was a fully industrialized country. Yet since the process of industrialization, which had taken place almost a century later than in England, was not accompanied by any significant shift in the structure of power, fewer traditional assumptions had been questioned and the arts had remained more conservative. The disappearance of the old social order thus revealed an unbridgeable gap between art and actuality: a gulf that had already been exposed in the plays and operettas put on for the troops. The official cultural values appeared hypocritical in the context of trench warfare. The Classics and conventional comedies ignored reality and disguised the brutalization of the individual. By contrast, the machinery of mass-destruction and the headlong wastage of men and materials provided an eidetic image of the mechanization and tempo of modern life. The extent and inhumanity of the cataclysm exposed the inadequacy of traditional artistic responses.

Two factors accentuated this contrast for German artists. Unlike their English counterparts, they served in the ranks and were sensitized by their lack of responsibility as well as the degradation of