

Reviews

theatre in Berlin. Its initial interest for people concerned with political theatre today will lie in the principles and aims behind Piscator's work — principles and aims which are not dissimilar from those of the Left theatre movement now. For example, part of the programme of *Proletarisches Theater*, a small agit-prop group touring halls and meeting-rooms in working-class districts which was Piscator's first venture into political theatre, requires:

' . . . simplicity of expression, lucidity of structure, and a clear effect on the feelings of a working-class audience. Subordination of all artistic aims to the revolutionary goal: conscious emphasis on and cultivation of the idea of class struggle.'

When that company's home was closed down by the Social Democratic authorities, the development of 'epic' theatre began through Piscator's involvement with the *Volksbühne*, originally set up as a workers' theatre but which had settled in more recent times for more conventional and classical fare. His use of revue-like short scenes, projection and film, revolving and conveyor-belt stages, and his collaboration with visual artists like Grosz and Heartfield have all become familiar as part of the trappings of that 'epic' style; what is perhaps less familiar is the drive of that age towards 'objective' theatre, the consideration that history and politics were of primary importance, the desire to put the latest technological developments in theatre at the service of the international workers' movement.

Needless to say, such considerations and desires did not go unimpeded. The catalogue of trials and tribulations which Piscator's company faced during its progress to the celebrated *Piscator-Bühne* productions at the Theater am Nollendorfplatz had both external and internal dimensions not unfamiliar to Left theatre practitioners now. Beginning with his feeling of shame at declaring his profession while serving on the front in 1915, through his account of the slowness of the labour movement to take theatre seriously, and on to the Communist Party's reluctance to support 'propaganda', the setting is familiar. And when it comes to the internal organisation of his company and their approach to aesthetic issues, the dilemmas have even more of a contemporary ring. Appeal to the emotion or to the intellect? Plays for pleasure or only for 'aggressive' propaganda? Working only with working-class actors possessed of revolutionary consciousness, or using stars and actresses connected with wealthy backers — as he did later on for the famous season which included *Schweyk*.

Even the accounts of last-minute panics on first nights (as with the documentary *In Spite of Everything*) and the familiar complaint of 'not enough time' are not without their political overtones when one considers the extent to which Piscator swept all before him in order to realise his vision of Marxist theatre on a grand scale. Charges of being dictatorial with companies, insensitive to writers, and of his direction sometimes erring on the side of gimmickry are dismissed by him, usually with political arguments but not without a hint of the self-righteousness worthy of his ancestor Johannes (one of the first German translators of the bible), a quality which Hugh Rorrison is quick to detect in his notes.

Comments like 'Perhaps my whole style of directing is a direct result of the total lack of suitable plays' and 'My technical devices had been developed to cover up the deficiencies of the dramatists' products go some of the way perhaps to explaining why Brecht never collaborated with him on a major project. Certainly, as the book continues, the urge to read deeper and deeper between the lines grows greater. What went on in people's minds, for example, when the benevolent idea of employing trade unionists to provide a mass choir for their productions of Upton Sinclair's 'Singing Jailbirds' nearly resulted in strike action over their wages? His task was made no easier either by his contemporary critics, with the exception of Herbert Ihering and Walter Kerr. Otherwise the response of the Berlin critics to his work was again depressingly familiar. Beginning with the hackneyed cry for the 'well-rounded' characters they missed in his early productions, they then used the self-same aesthetic criteria he had established to attack him over the later, more 'popular' comedy *Boom*.

By this time however it was revealed that the *Piscator-Bühne* was in debt to the tune of some 200,000 marks, a problem Piscator ascribes generously to his administrator Otto Katz. Even the 'Special Sections' of the *Volksbühne*, a group of young workers in that organisation, numbering 16,000 and giving Piscator his strongest most consistent support through block bookings, weren't enough to guarantee the existence of his theatre. Neither were the 400,000 marks of the Schultheiss brewery — the company was nicknamed for a while the *Piscator-Bühne*. So it's not without some irony then that one of Piscator's remarks echoes through this book: 'No other art form . . . relies so heavily on the existence of a community of like-minded people as does the theatre.'

How true.

Steve Gooch

THE POLITICAL THEATRE

Erwin Piscator

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This long overdue edition of Piscator's only book, with copious introductory notes to each chapter by Hugh Rorrison, goes a long way towards filling out for a British readership our picture of 1920s political