

NOTES ON THE POLISH THEATRE

by

Jerry Dawson

For some time before the eventful days of last October the Polish theatre had been revelling in the 'thaw/ New dramatic groups had been springing up everywhere—the satirical student theatre Bim-Bom at Gdansk, the experimental theatre on Tarczynska Street in Warsaw, the surrealist Cricot 2 at Cracow. The names of Anouilh, Giraudoux, Steinbeck and Ionescu on the theatre bills were evidence of renewed contact with the west. The Polish theatre, above all, had been asserting its national independence by the rediscovery of its great romantic drama with vigorous productions of "Forefather's Eve" by Mickiewicz, "Kordian" and "Balladyna" by Slovacki and "Marriage" by Wyspianski.

This questing critical spirit touched all things. At Nowa Huta, the new steel town of Poland, I saw a production of "Measure for Measure" in terms of the cult of the individual. The first scene was played, gaily but not too unconventionally, before a bright array of flags, but no sooner had the easy-going Duke handed over authority to the austere Angelo than these, were whisked into the flies to reveal the harsh permanent set—a grey prison wall in the background, mounted by a tubular structure which derived from the watch-towers of the Auschwitz concentration camp, and on the stage the bars of the prison, the central visual image of the production. Before another word of Shakespeare was spoken the consequences of Angelo's assumption of power were shown in the harrying of the bawds and pimps, the arrest of Claudio, the tread of a menacing soldier on the rampart, wall, and finally the procession of Angelo through the city at the head of his henchmen—among them one carrying high in the air a standard bearing Angelo's portrait.

It would be easy now, in the light of the decisive 8th Plenum, to read more political foresight into the production than was perhaps intended. Indeed, apart from the one over-emphatic touch of the standard bearer, the producer built up her picture of the prison-state from Shakespeare's text rather than from self-conscious tricks. In the immediate post-war years the harsh menacing music, the jackboots, the dominant black of the costumes might have suggested the Nazi occupation. But in October only one interpretation was possible. The fantastic Lucio slandering Angelo to the disguised Duke in hurried whispers, broken off whenever the soldier appeared on the wall above, recalled a more

recent police state when criticism was voiced only through cafe rumours.

Even in October it may still have been too early to carry through this interpretation to the bitter end. The end of the play, always a problem on the stage, was in fact far from bitter. When the Duke resumed power the gay flags, dropped again before the permanent set, the players stepped out of character, the play was over—and it only remained for the actors to improvise a happy ending for the 'comedy'. The producer found her justification in the irony of Shakespeare's title—but perhaps in mid-October there could still be no measure for measure even on the stage.

And yet a new comedy which I saw in Warsaw went well beyond the limits which would be tolerated by our own Lord Chamberlain. "The Feast of Winkelreid" made a searing attack upon bureaucracy, over-ardent militiamen, time-serving poets, naive educationalists, and many recognisable figures from the Polish and Russian political scene. The young Winkelreid, son of the famous Swiss freedom-fighter, has been summoned by the burgo-master to take part in a celebration in honour of his heroic father. A bucolic Schweik, he is concerned only with regaining the family meadow which has been declared forfeit twenty years ago during the resistance struggle. On arrival in town he is clapped into gaol by a militiaman who knows that prison is the only place for the sons of resistance leaders. Released from Prison, he is received by the burgomaster, who is rehearsing his usual speech before a mirror, and by his wife, who lies in bed reading "Vogue" and eating chocolates (in the original production at Lodz, the burgomaster was made up to look like the premier Cyrankiewicz whose wife is the famous actress Nina Andrycz). The great national day arrives — a stage national day to end all national days. The ambassador from Portugal (again originally sporting a strangely Bulganinesque beard) promises neighbourly help (the first three consignments free); the bureaucrats and their wives go through their routine applause, the schoolmistress (not quite on cue) leads her lubberly louts in patriotic song, and the great dramatic tribute, in which young Winkelreid is made to act the part of his freedom-fighting father, begins—until Winkelreid tears off his stage trappings, demands the return of his meadow, and the crowd takes up the revolutionary cry of •'Long Live the 3 Ws—Winkelreid, meadow, and liberty." The national uprising beings. Two unfortunate militiamen, the last to know that the line has changed, are pursued by the crowd. The burgomaster is offered asylum by the Portuguese ambassador. But in an inspired moment he too raises the cry of the 3 Ws, is acclaimed the new leader and, as the curtain comes down, ruefully recognises that he faces a busy time genning up on all the new ideas.

I may have got some of the detail wrong—it depended at the

time on the promptings of the interpreter. But there can be no doubt about the reaction of the Warsaw audience. They broke into applause, even into cheers worthy of a last night Prom concert, at every crack with topical significance. Only in the 'thirties' at performances of "Waiting for Lefty," have I seen such complete sympathy between actors and audience. Here was a theatre which had been quickened into life by the political awakening of the new Poland. Here was a theatre which was invigorating the struggle for a better Poland. Perhaps this is not the least important lesson which Poland in October had to teach us. **