

CHINA'S THEATER IN FLUX

Brecht's *Galileo* and Lao She's *Teahouse* Mounted.

By Dr. Mark Hall Amitin

Dr. Mark Hall Amitin traveled in China for two months in 1979, conducting workshop and lecture programs relating to theater in a number of cities and meeting with actors, directors and playwrights. He lectures on tour here in the United States with a two-hour program based on his travels in China.

During the Summer of 1979 I visited with a number of theatre companies in the People's Republic of China. In viewing rehearsals and performances and meeting with actors and directors, it was quite clear that the residue of the great Cultural Revolution has almost washed away. No longer the didactic rhetoric or limited repertory of the eight revolutionary romantic libretti dominate; the stages have, once again, begun to blossom.

Throughout the ten years of the Cultural Revolution, virtually all the artists presently working in the theatre world in China were forbidden to work. Most were, in fact, placed in labor camps or imprisoned. Now they have been "rehabilitated" and returned to their previous positions. With their return has come a renaissance that includes Western theatre as well: there have been productions of Shakespeare, Brecht, an adaptation of the American film, "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?" and of "Cinderella." There has also been a revival of numerous heretofore forbidden plays of such famous Chinese writers as Cao Yu and Lao She.

The major theatres have as many as 400-500 people attached to them, including technical and design personnel. Since the Cultural Revolution claimed the dramatic academies, the theatres now have groups of apprentices working and training with them.

The artists working again now possess a fervor and devotion to their art that can only be imagined by most in the West. Many had their earliest training on the battlefields—performing with small troupes in out of the way villages during the 1940s—making plays against the Japanese invaders. Later, at the end of World War II, they created plays against

the Guomindang. With the success of the Communist forces they marched into the major cities to set up what now comprise the major theatre companies of today, confirming Mao Zedong's statement that "there are two armies: the one of the gun and the one of the pen."

From 1949-59 these older artists trained with a great emphasis on the Stanislavski system under the direct tutelage of artists from the Soviet Union. Many, in fact, trained in Moscow, and some fortunate enough, like Chen Yong, director of the Beijing Youth Art Theatre, studied with the Moscow Art Theatre.

Chen Yong collaborated with Huang Zholin, director of Shanghai's People's Art Theatre, on the recent

production of Brecht's *The Life of Galileo* produced at the Beijing Youth Art Theatre. In meeting with them they explained their methods of working on a piece. In the specific case of *Galileo*, three months were spent in research and study before rehearsals began. The actors, designers, and directors all studied Brecht's life, the political period in Italy in the 16th and early 17th centuries. Costume, music, dance, scientific theory and the relationship of the church and state were all delved into. The actual rehearsal process is a collaborative effort with actors suggesting style and movement as well as utilizing the directors' views. The text of *Galileo* was made from a new translation. New music for the



The Beijing Youth Art Theater production of *Galileo*.



The Beijing People's Art Theater production of *Teahouse*.

period was composed by the Central Philharmonic Orchestra.

Viewing an interpretation of Brecht through Stanislavsky training was something of a contradiction, but the production was colorful and robust. It showed a trend away from the overtly didactic plays of the past and a return of respect for some of the creative ideas emanating from the West. Of course, one must remember that Brecht's politic was devoutly Marxist and as Huang pointed out, though Galileo's fate is separated from today by nearly four centuries, the cause and effect were not at all unlike the recent Chinese debacle. The company chose to portray the characters in Western dress and period and their use of make-up to accomplish the look of Caucasians was a great surprise.

The Beijing People's Art Theatre, considered to be the premiere company in China, presented a revival of *Teahouse*. Written by Lao She, it was produced by the same theatre in 1958. The play was banned in 1966 along with all of Lao's other works.

Now over 80,000 people wait for tickets. Lao She was arrested, imprisoned and, it is said, beaten to death by the Red Guards in 1966. He and his family were close friends of Zhou Enlai.

The Capitol Theatre which is home to the Beijing People's Art Theatre is, by Chinese standards, a luxurious facility. The theatre recently hosted the visiting Old Vic from London and the National Greek Theatre from Athens. The apparatus, like most technical things in the PRC, lag far behind ours, but the production of *Teahouse* suffered little from this lack.

The play is set in three time frames: the first act in 1898 in the last days of the failing Manchu (Qing) Dynasty, the second in 1921 just after the founding of the Communist Party and the final in 1948 on the eve of Liberation. The writing is sharp and alert and filled with robust, warm humor. The dialogue reflects the real people and their humanity . . . not at all laden with dialectic . . . and keen in its observations from

period to period, carefully showing the changes in the lives of the people as well as in the times.

Each of these major Chinese theatre companies produce between six to eight productions in a repertory situation each year, sending one or two full productions to tour in the provinces, in factories and communes. The present state of the theatre is in major flux—reflective of the upheaval of the times themselves. But it is opening to all kinds of developments from within as well as to a limited amount of influence from outside.

In the last few months Huang Zhoulin travelled to West Germany to view theatre and meet with theatre professionals from Europe. Here in the US the Center for US-China Arts Exchange in cooperation with the Committee on Scholarly Communication with the PRC brought playwright Cao Yu for a six-week tour.

It is exciting to look forward to experimentation with hybrid forms that may be generated by the influx of new ideas merging with the old. □