

THEATRE NEWS



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NEW THEATRE IN A NEW CHINA

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During the summer, 1979, I visited a number of theatre companies in the Peoples Republic of China. In viewing some rehearsals and performances, meeting with a number of actors and directors, it became clear that the great Cultural Revolution was dead. No longer the didactic rhetoric or limited repertory

of a few pro-revolutionary libretti, the stages have once again begun to blossom.

During the ten years of the Cultural Revolution virtually all the artists presently in the theatre world in China were not allowed to work. Most were, in fact, imprisoned or placed in labor camps. Now they have been 'rehabilitated', as it is referred to, and returned to their previous posts. With their return has come a renaissance of sorts that includes some Western theatre as well. Recently there have been productions of Shakespeare, Brecht, and adaptation of Cinderella and even of the American film,

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?, and a revival of numerous heretofore forbidden plays of such Chinese writers as Cao Yu, Lao She among others.

The major theatres have as many as 400-500 people attached to them, including technical and design personnel and, since the Cultural Revolution claimed the dramatic academies, the theatres now have groups of apprentices working and training with them. There is a missing generation, however, of mid-twenty to mid-thirty year olds. Those who performed the allowed and prescribed eight revolutionary operas between 1966-76 have since returned to their factories and farms from whence they came, and left a gap that will probably go unfilled.

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 1940's making plays against the Japanese invaders. Later, at the end of the Second World War, they created plays against the Gou Mondang forces of Chaing Kai-chek. With the success of the Communist forces they marched with them 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 Peoples 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 Sixteenth and early Seventeenth 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 taking from the original in

German and other translations in both English and Russian. New music for the period was composed by the Central Philharmonic Orchestra.

It is an odd combination viewing the interpretation of Brecht through Stanislavski's training, but the production itself was colorful and robust, reflecting a sway in the desires of the audience itself away from the overly didactic plays of the past and a return to a respect for some of the creative ideas emanating from the West. Of course, one must remember that Brecht's politics were devoutly Marxist and, as Huang pointed out, Galileo's dilemma and fate were separated by nearly four centuries; the cause and effect were not at all unlike the recent Chinese debacle. The group chose to portray the characters in Western style dress and in period. Their employment of make-up to accomplish this was a great surprise, but depicted with truth and realism.

The Beijing Peoples Art Theatre, considered to be the premiere company in China, was presenting a revival of *Teahouse*. First written by Lao She and produced in 1958, it was banned in 1966 along with Lao's other works. Now is has a waiting list of over 80,000 people for tickets and is receiving, along with Lao's other works, a great deal of attention. Lao She was arrested, imprisoned, and died in detention two months later in March, 1966. He was then denounced as revisionist. He was a close personal friend of Zhou Enlai.

The Capitol Theatre which houses the Beijing Peoples Art Theatre is, by Chinese standards, a luxurious facility, recently housing the Old Vic from London, though their apparatus, like most technical things in the P.R.C., lag far behind. The production of *Teahouse* suffered none from this lack of facility. The play is set in three time frames, and is what we refer to as a well-made three act play. Set in Beijing, the first act takes place in 1898 in the final years of the Ching Dynasty; the second in 1921 just after the founding of the Communist Party; and the last in 1948 in the final months before Liberation. The writing is sharp and alert, the dialogue reflective of the real people and their humanity, not laden with dialectical diatribe, and keen in its shifts from period to period, carefully showing the changes in the lives as well as the times. Each of these companies works basically with a repertory situation, producing between six and eight plays per year.

There seems to be a longing here to

know what has happened to the ritual, native, and folk forms of theatre. I fear that most are gone except perhaps off in the nether regions of Tibet and other far flung places. The Peking Opera has survived in terms of style and form, but its content is drastically altered, probably forever. For us to judge for better or worse is inappropriate, except from an anthropological point of view. The present state of the theatre is in a major flux reflective of the upheaval of the times themselves, but with that reflection it is opening to all kinds of developments from within as well as a limited amount of influence from the exterior.

What should be most exciting to see is what experimentation will take place and to follow the hybrid forms that may be generated by the influx of new ideas and its merging with the old.

In the winter, 1981, it is planned that the Beijing Peoples Art Theatre will tour a few major cities in the United States under the auspices of the Center for US-China Arts Exchange.