

The Drama of Revolution

By Laura Shapiro

According to Mark Hall Amitin, the Universal Movement Theatre Repertory is a non-profit, tax-exempt cultural organization dedicated to completely defeating the capitalist system. So what else is new? Well, I believe him, that's what. Not that UMTR will completely defeat etc., but that it's dedicated, and that the theatre is one good place to fight it out.

UMTR is actually a collection of theatres, fifteen radical (artistically and otherwise) groups from Cambridge, New York, California and several foreign countries. Through the central organization, of which Mark Amitin is co-ordinator, the groups can arrange bookings in one another's theatres, set up joint workshops and exchange programs, and generally communicate their ideas and plans. A couple of weeks ago Le Theatre Laboratoire Vicinal de Bruxelles visited the Caravan Theatre — Boston's representation in the UMTR — to give four performances of "Saboo" as part of its month-long tour of the United States, and while they were here I got a chance to talk with Mark Amitin one evening at the Orson Welles' Restaurant.

The organization was born, or rather reborn, last summer, when Mark reorganized and incorporated the former Radical Theatre Repertory, giving it all the advantage of a new name and none of the disadvantages of the old debts. "We did that with airplane glue and paper clips, no money," he said. What inspired the venture was a performance by the Living Theatre two years ago. "It overwhelmed me completely, it woke me up politically, emotionally and theatrically. There was an ad in the Village Voice for a job there, and I must have been the first person to read the Voice that week because they hired me, as production assistant. Three weeks later I became manager of the tour, then I was traveling with the company. So I got into the realm of all that."

The Living Theatre tour that year included a many-hassled stop in Boston, he told me. First MIT

cancelled their last two performances, ostensibly due to the snoking in the auditorium but probably because MIT students were then harboring an AWOL GI and who could tell what awful conspiracy might be hidden somewhere in the works. The company was rebooked into John Hancock Hall and promptly unbooked right out again by the directors of the Hall; they finally landed in Roxbury, at Crown Manor, whose residents effectively scared off the attendant Vice Squad.

Dealing with establishment madness of that sort gave Mark a lot of experience for dealing with fifteen times as much of it in UMTR, and on an international level. The Vicinal, for example, was held up by U.S. Immigration when they tried to enter the country; for no stated reason their papers had not been approved. Their first bookings here were at the University of Texas, so a Texas congressman who was on the University's Board of Directors made an appropriate phone call and the company was cleared in five minutes. Meanwhile however they had missed three performances, drastically altering the state of their income.

And income is an interesting problem for an organization like UMTR.

"It's hard to deal on both sides of the coin," Mark admitted. "We're a non-capitalist group, but we've got to deal with bank accounts, with the post office, with car rental agencies — those are the people that give us the worst problems, by the way. We'll probably take a loss on the Brussels group. I brought them over on credit. I have some dear, beautiful friends who run a travel bureau, very turned-on, beautiful people. So I send them a hundred dollars a week — if I don't have it, I don't send it. They've never said anything.

"We always ask the ticket prices when we're booking, and we never let it be more than three dollars a seat. Why rip off our own people? We want to prevent these groups from being ripped off themselves, by commercial manager types. I've been approached by corporations,

rock concert managers, all those people who want to make a profit by making deals with us. We've refused them all."

He went on to talk about the fifteen groups — actually about eighteen by now, with the addition of theatres from Argentina and Brazil — and their common concerns. "They're trying to reach people on a very simple level. It's not providing entertainment per se, and it's not necessarily political, but they're socially oriented to an alternative way of life. Their life styles are very anti-capitalist, many of them live and work as communés. They're concerned with creation and communication, pertinent to what's going on in the world. We've got a whole generation with an alternative culture, and we have to bring it to people. We're no longer talking at people, presenting them with a closed package. Our primary concern is that people be experiencing it. The Vicinal and the Bread and Puppet Theatre toured all over Canada, not just the big cities — it's important to have a massive assault with this culture, bringing it to as many people as possible."

UMTR is also working to set up festivals of radical theatre and films, hopefully in Boston, Montreal and San Francisco. Last summer there was one in Toronto, with five theatre groups and two films; and presently several of what Mark called the "videofreaks" in New York are working on presentations of combined media, using videotape as well as theatre and film.

Cynic as I'm getting to be about the counter-culture business, I was pretty much impressed by this spiel, and if the UMTR stays poor and pure I will probably remain impressed forever. Still, all would be for naught if the theatre groups themselves weren't worth it, but I can safely report that "Saboo" is a remarkable experience which I didn't exactly understand in a crystalline way but which I would willingly undergo again. I think it was all very clear on stage, it's just our daily muddled minds that have to be cleaned out.