

production during this period. Through the experiences of exile, many emigrants had come to a 'more politicized understanding of the tasks of theater in society. After their return to Germany in 1945 their hope to reeducate the German people with artistic means and to establish a new theatrical tradition was not fulfilled. According to Wächter, theater in the Western zones and later in the Federal Republic regressed "to unpolitical, vaguely humanistic intellectual attitudes." Real problems and issues were avoided by an escape into the superficially happy world of comedy.

As documented by the archive of the "German Theater and Film Production in Exile" (*Deutsches Theater- und Filmschaffen im Exil*) at the GDR Academy of Arts, there were close to 2,400 theater people and 300 dramatists, librettists or radio play authors in exile; 450 dramatic works were written by these authors and there were approximately 800 productions. Wächter has listed the known works and productions in a documentary appendix including exact dates. In his summary the author states that German theater has not yet discovered the plays which originated in exile; however, with the exception of Brecht, whose plays are performed frequently anyway, it is still very questionable whether these works have any significance beyond their original political function.

The only chance which working class theater and working class literature have today, and will have in the future, is their use value. At the end of his introductory comments, Friedrich Knilli asks: "Was the early German working class theater *low* literature or *literature of the lowly*?" And he answers in the following manner: "It was *low* and *high* literature—*high*, or the literature of the establishment, insofar as it was literature useful to the high or ruling labor aristocracy; *low*, or literature of the struggle, insofar as it was literature of the lowly and humiliated who were involved in the class struggle."

Klaus Völker

Asja Lacin, *Revolutionär im Beruf: Berichte über proletarisches Theater, über Meyerhold, Brecht, Benjamin und Piscator*. Ed. Hildegard Brenner. Munich: Rogner & Bernhard, 1971. 132 pages.

#### I. Who is Asja Lacin?

—She is the unjustly forgotten and extremely important missing link between early Soviet experimental theater and revolutionary theater in the Weimar Republic.

—She was the personal friend and collaborator of Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht (whom she introduced to each other), Erwin Piscator, Bernhard Reich, and many other important people in theater and politics. She was a primary influence in moving Benjamin to the Left, and a witness for his Marxist position after his death. Along with Reich she is also responsible for making Brecht known in the Soviet Union.

—She is a thorough and accurate reporter of the production and ideas of Meyerhold, Tairov, Mayakovsky, Toller, Piscator, Brecht, and many lay theaters and agitprop groups.

—She has for decades been a leading director of proletarian, experimental and revolutionary theater in Russia and her native Latvia.

—She is the originator of a kind of theater therapy for juvenile delinquent war orphans in Latvia and Russia, a work she chose instead of an established theater career.

—She is above all a remarkable proletarian woman, who received an education despite her sex and class, because of her own and her progressive father's determination, and at the time of the Russian Revolution, she decided to put her talent and education entirely in the service of socialism and the working class. She has done this, modestly and effectively, for her entire life.

II. If she's so important, how come we Brecht-Piscator-Benjamin fans don't know about her?

From both the Right and the Left she has been made a non-person. When Adorno published Benjamin's works, he eliminated Benjamin's dedication of *One-Way Street* to her and her joint authorship of an article on Naples. (For a discussion of this controversy see *Alternative* Nos. 56/57 and 59/60.) On the other hand the Stalinist government disapproved—presumably—her connection with foreigners, her advocacy of experimental forms and her implied opposition to the conservatism of RAPP, the rigid Union of Proletarian Writers. She spent ten years as a political prisoner, but she does not say when or for what, only "I was forced to spend ten years in Kazakhstan."

Doubtless her obscurity is due partly to her sex. Surely no male collaborator of such luminaries could be so ignored by posterity. But if it is her sex that condemns her to obscurity, she seems to have been an accomplice in the plot: she has a sort of "female" modesty almost to a fault. When she talks about herself, she simply reports what has happened, without pointing out that hers has been an extraordinary career for a woman. She takes some credit for influencing Benjamin toward Marxism, but is otherwise content to count her associates the important people rather than herself. She describes Brecht's and Benjamin's homes, habits, dress in detail but never mentions her relationship with Bernhard Reich or who was the father of her daughter Daga. She reports the ideas of everyone involved in proletarian theater except (with a few exceptions) her own. And yet, the many people interested in her must have found her fascinating for her own ideas, and not simply as a listener. Of course the book is not really an autobiography, but still one wishes frequently for more about *her*, how she came to be involved in so much and the conflicts she may have experienced as a woman. On balance, however, it is refreshing to listen to a woman who takes her emancipation for granted and gets down to talk about her work and others' work, rather than considering difficulty in achieving equal recognition to be itself her life work and justification.

### III. What kind of book is this?

*Revolutionary by Profession* is divided into two parts. The first and most interesting is a collection of taped interviews with the editor, articles by Lacis from *Alternative*, *Sinn und Form*, and *Die Scene*, articles and a letter by Walter Benjamin, and some written additions by Lacis for this book. (A portion of this book has been translated along with Benjamin's "Program of a Proletarian Children's Theater," based on her work. See *Performance*, March 1973.) The second part is a German translation of about one third of her book *Revolutionary Theater in Germany* published in Russian in 1935.

Her reminiscences begin with her early childhood in Latvia as the child of a poor but progressive artisan, through her education in the only university open to women, in St. Petersburg, and her theater study in Moscow. She describes the prerevolution productions of Meyerhold, Mayakovsky and Tairov in great detail and gives a vivid sense of their stimulating effect on youth.

When the Soviets took power in Moscow she became, and all her life remained, "a good soldier of the revolution." She rejected a promising career in the established theater because she could not ignore the war orphans who had turned into cynical bands of young thieves. Her most original contribution to theater and society was probably her school for these young delinquents, whose respect she gained by having them observe and improvise scenes from their own rough life. She developed a theory of proletarian children's theater based on this sort of psychodrama, where the children learn to do everything themselves rather than to obey a dictatorial director who in fact stifles their creativity. Walter Benjamin later wrote up the program of her theories included in this book.

After her work with children's theater, she directed a theater studio at the People's University in Riga, where, despite police repression, she developed constructivist and mass outdoor forms which were repeated as a tradition until forbidden in 1928. She then moved to Berlin where she became the spokesman for Soviet experimental theater. She met Fritz Lang, Alexander Granach and Bernhard Reich, and, in Munich, Bertolt Brecht, Caspar Neher, and Karl Valentin. In Brecht's *Eduard II* she directed the mass scenes and played young Eduard. She describes charmingly Brecht's style of work: his simplicity, precision, and patience, and his ability to work collectively.

In 1924 she met Walter Benjamin. She seems to have been more of an influence on him than he on her, and it is in her recounting of their conversations that we discover many of her own ideas. Some time later she introduced Brecht to Benjamin, but they became good friends only later.

The other vignettes cover her work and friends in Riga again, where her theater developed an original form of charades to fool the censors, then Moscow, where she pioneered a children's movie house with Krupskaya's help, then again Berlin where she was send in 1928 as liaison between the Soviet Proletarian Theater Group and the German Union of Proletarian Writers. She tells how she angered Johannes R. Becher's party dogmatism by lecturing more on the Russian structuralists than the

RAPP members. Here she also tells of Benjamin's and Brecht's important criticism of the Communist Party's optimism: it ignored the sizeable petty bourgeoisie, which was susceptible to Hitler. But only later did she come to agree with Benjamin's criticism of Party aesthetics, namely that, although materialism was correct, it should not be carried to the point of vulgar sociology which ignores the poetic and aesthetic. Benjamin introduced her to Siegfried Kracauer, the film critic, and with him she brought Soviet documentary film to Germany for the first time.

When she returned to Moscow in 1931, she spent two years helping Piscator make a film of Anna Seghers' *Uprising of the Santa Barbara Fishermen*. Some time after that she was "forced to spend ten years in Kazakhstan." When she returned to work in 1948, it was as chief director of the state theater in Valmiera, which played mostly to collective farmers. Her memoirs end with Brecht's trip to Moscow in 1955, when he promised her a shorter version of his *Caucasian Chalk Circle* for her farmers' theater. But he died first. Later, she says, she directed 60 performances of *Mother Courage* in the Soviet Union.

Those rich but sketchy memories constitute only 70 pages. The second section, *Revolutionary Theater in Germany*, is another 45, and again there is a wealth of observation and useful detail packed into a small space. But it is no mere catalogue of groups and performances. She shows how often necessity (usually police or finances) was the mother of dramaturgic invention and how the political and economic situation influenced repertory, style, and the very existence of the theaters; she also reproduces the controversy and discussions between advocates of mass drama vs. short scenes, professional vs. lay actors, agitprop shows vs. plays, optimistic vs. critical conclusions, and shows why at certain times one was chosen over another.

What she does not do, at least in this selection, is try to answer the hard question: why a revolutionary proletarian theater, a Party and mass movement, with so much cultural life and so much optimism, failed so miserably when the Nazis made their grab for power? In her memoirs, too, she only occasionally mentions the disaster of Germany and makes only one attempt to analyze what was wrong with the antifascist and prosocialist movement of which she and all her collaborators were a part.

Nevertheless, for anyone interested in working class theater or that period, the book is full of detail and insight, told unpretentiously and with the desire, apparently, only to be useful.

*Patty Lee Parmalee*