

Report on Work in the Half Moon Theatre

For the last few months I have been working in the Writers' Workshop attached to the Half Moon Theatre, in the East End of London.

The theatre, although -- at least for the time being -- supported by grants from the Arts Council and local councils, regards itself (although this is not written into any constitution) as "progressive" or "left-wing", and many of those attached to it regard this as synonymous with "socialism".

The Writers' Workshop came into being because the Management Committee of the theatre found it very difficult to find good, progressive plays to present, and the aim of the workshop was to train writers to create plays for the theatre with a progressive theme and, as far as possible, local interest.

When I joined the workshop last autumn, it consisted of a mixed bag of, on the whole, young aspiring playwrights with a typical petty-bourgeois outlook. In political affiliation the majority were trotskysts of various brands, the largest number belonging to the Workers' Revolutionary Party (which is relatively strong in the theatre), with a sprinkling of anarchists and social-democrats.

The first step was to attempt to get some kind of elementary organisation framework, the anarchists being opposed to having even a rotating Chairman to try and keep some semblance of order at meetings. For the first few weeks, therefore, there was complete chaos, with meetings taking place in the public bars of various pubs -- the particular one depending merely on whether there was any room!

Eventually the first battle was won, and a small Organising Committee was elected and the anarchists withdrew in disgust muttering "dictatorship!".

For the next few months meetings were at least properly organised and consisted of readings of plays submitted by the members of the workshop. At first the workshop was open in this respect to anyone, but when a young chap arrived from somewhere and a play of his turned out to be perniciously male chauvinist in theme, the women members came round to my point of view that there must be some kind of criteria which potential members should be expected to adhere to.

The trotskysts then got together and submitted a manifesto on art written in the 1930s under the influence of Trotsky. As the workshop had no duplicating facilities, I agreed to duplicate this manifesto for circulation, provided I could circulate with it a rival document saying why I thought the manifesto should not be adopted by the workshop.

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When this had been circulated, the trotskyists demanded the right to circulate a further document criticising my document -- but never, in fact, got around to doing this. In consequence, a resolution was adopted along the lines of my proposals to form the basis of a constitution. There was an interesting discussion as to whether the workshop should describe itself as "socialist". My view was that this was too narrow, and that the theatre should welcome anti-fascist plays and playwrights even if they were not socialist. As the Secretary was in this category, and said that she would feel compelled to resign from the workshop if the term "socialist" were used, I eventually won the point that the workshop should describe itself as basing itself on the ideal of "progressive theatre", defined as "theatre which consciously aims at advancing the cause of the working people". This was accepted unanimously.

The plays presented ~~which~~ were ^{now} expected to fit in with this criterion, but it soon became clear that the trotskyists in particular had (with one exception) no idea of what "progressive theatre" meant. They continued to submit and have read plays which were no more than a purgation of their sexual hang-ups with few words exceeding four letters in length, believing that this became a "progressive" play if one character said somewhere "I'm like this because of capitalism".

I put in a play of mine "The Ghost at the Wedding" set in modern Albania. This split the workshop down the middle: almost exactly half the members praised it highly and compared it, I think without justification, to Lorca and Synge; the other half described it as "19th. century Barbara Cartland" and as "so bad that even Mary Whitehouse would not have objected to it". For me it was a most interesting experience to hear a play of mine read by professional actors. Although not all the critical discussion was helpful, some of it was and, indeed, the mere act of reading revealed to me some weaknesses (in, for example, characterisation) that I had not previously seen. I am now rewriting the play in the light of experience.

In replying to the discussion, I made the points that:

1) reading a writer's play and discussing it was not enough to develop a writer; that a writer who had had his play read should have ^{the time of} his play stuck up on the notice-board and any other writer who felt like trying to assist him in removing defects should put his name up on the board; when this process had been completed, the play should be read a second time;

2) that the workshop should do more than just criticise the work of its members; it should endeavour to master the theory of dramatic aesthetics.

I was a little surprised at the strong opposition which this last proposal aroused, and to hear writers who regarded themselves as "revolutionary socialists" asserting that there was no theory of dramatic aesthetics, that artistic creativity was something you were born with, that artistic work could not be compared with any other kind of work, that the true artist was a chip off the divine spirit.

Eventually it was ~~announced~~^{conceded} that a theory class would be held once a month, open to those who wanted to attend, while the other three meetings a month would be devoted to "practice". A syllabus was eventually agreed upon, and it was agreed that members who had a particular sympathy for a particular theorist (e.g., Brecht) should prepare and deliver the material on that theorist.

As nobody wanted to tackle Aristotle, I did this. And in the discussion which followed, the whole concept of the artist as "the engineer of the human soul" (in Stalin's words) came out clearly. At the next practical meeting, those who had attended the class proposed that the workshop should dedicate itself to a particular working class struggle (in this case, the social workers' strike was agreed upon) and that each member should over the next three weeks submit a short play or sketch on this theme. Representatives of the local social workers were invited along to the readings, which were indeed, almost without exception, very good. What was interesting was the slightly different approach which each writer had taken. The social workers then selected the three sketches which they felt would be most useful in agit-proping their cause. These were then rehearsed by actors from the Half Moon and presented at a number of meetings in the East End (including the union conference, to put the social workers' case before other members of the same union). My sketch was one of the three selected, and I enclose a copy.

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At the next meeting there was a feeling of great enthusiasm. It was announced that an East End Festival was to be held at the theatre in March, and that the Management Committee hoped that the workshop would put something on for three nights of the festival in return for a special grant of £2,000 from the Arts Council. At this meeting a representative of the Dockland Action Committee (save what's left of the docks,

factories and houses not tourist marinas' attended, and expressed the hope that the workshop might assist the Committee in its campaign. The result was that it was agreed to put on some kind of revue based on the theme of the docks. My dearly beloved daughter could not at this point ^{begin} from saying: "My dad's been working on a script on just this theme for the last few months"! I was then asked whether I would allow my script to become the framework for a collective effort. Anxious not to appear an egotistic individualist, I agreed -- and must plead guilty here to a ghastly mistake. For the script that has emerged (or rather, is still in process of emerging) is unbelievably terrible, ~~ghastly~~, without a shred of artistic coherence. I think that most people who previously favoured the idea of "collective artistic creation" are now convinced that it is artistically wrong and that every work of art, if collectively produced, needs an individual directing hand. My own rather bitter view of this (for which I must take a large part of the blame) appears in the sketch herewith. I don't think I could bear to go and see the actual production, even though Eve is in it; it would be rather like going to the mortuary to identify the body of one's child after it has fallen into a concrete mixer!

The theory ^{concerns} ~~concerns~~ has not, as yet, proceeded beyond Aristotle!

I think that there are some interesting political lessons to be drawn from all this.


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