NEW DIRECTIONS IN THEATRE

General Editor JULIAN HILTON

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LARS KLEBERG

Translated from Swedish by Charles Rougle

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General Editor's Preface

In the past ten years, Theatre Studies has experienced remarkable international growth, students seeing in its marriage of the practical and the intellectual a creative and rewarding discipline. Some countries are now opening school and degree programmes in Theatre Studies for the first time; others are having to accommodate to the fact that a popular subject attracting large numbers of highly motivated students has to be given greater attention than hitherto. The professional theatre itself is changing, as graduates of degree and diploma programmes make their way through the 'fringe' into established theatre companies, film and television.

Two changes in attitudes have occurred as a result: first, that the relationship between teachers and practitioners has significantly improved, not least because many more people now have experience of both; secondly, that the widespread academic suspicion about theatre as a subject for study has at least been squarely faced, if not fully discredited. Yet there is still much to be done to translate the practical and educational achievements of the past decade into coherent theory, and this series is intended as a contribution to that task. Its contributors are chosen for their combination of professional and didactic skills, and are drawn from a wide range of countries, languages and styles in order to give some impression of the subject in its international perspective.

This series offers no single programme or ideology; yet all its authors have in common the sense of being in a period of transition and debate out of which the theory and practice of theatre cannot but emerge in a new form.

JULIAN HILTON

Preface

In the debates on 'revolutionary art' or 'cultural revolution' in the 1920s in Soviet Russia, several discourses seem to be intertwined, to run parallel, and even, at times, to coincide. The same can be said of the concept of the homogeneous and 'representative' auditorium during the period of theatrical modernism. One of the primary tasks of the analysis in the present book has been to distinguish and contrast different concepts, even at points where they sometimes seem to be using the same words. This has called for a somewhat archaeological approach of reconstruction and conjecture. Contemporaries of the period in question perhaps found it easier to distinguish between positions which at a historical distance tend to be swallowed up in a single '1920s discourse'. For example, the avant-gardists, the Proletkult activists, and the few Bolsheviks interested in art were in reality associated with quite different cultural contexts which automatically guaranteed various decodings of their sometimes almost identical phraseology. The reader of today is necessarily obliged to adopt an approach that reactivates these contexts and sharpens such distinctions.

If distinguishing and differentiating is the first of the two basic strategies of this study, the second seems to lead in the opposite direction. For the sake of conclusive comparisons, the analysis sometimes simplifies, and sometimes deliberately overexposes phenomena of rather different levels (for example, the theatrical practice of naturalist staging and the utopian programme of 'ritual theatre'). In retrospect, some of these typological strictures may appear somewhat 'anatomical', but because they are essential to the composition of the book, I have chosen to leave them largely unaltered from the original version.

In revising the text for the English edition I have generally tried to avoid superficially 'updating' the frame of reference; my afterthoughts are to be found in the Postscript. Certain passages have been shortened, some new paragraphs added, and the chapter 'The Provisional Abdication of Total Theatre' is new. The bibliographic references have been thoroughly revised with a view to the English-speaking reader. Apart from these changes, the central arguments of the book stand as they were formulated fifteen years ago.

Re-reading the original 1977 Swedish edition of the book, I have noted (with mixed feelings of satisfaction and disappointment) that the wealth

of research on the Russian avant-garde and the Soviet 1920s published in the meantime has not rendered my treatment of the basic issue obsolete: the interrelationship between art and the public, or, in the language of semiotics, the pragmatic aspect of art. Furthermore, what must be considered the new standard work in the field, Konstantin Rudnitsky's strictly inductive survey *Russian and Soviet Theatre. Tradition and the Avant-Garde* (1988) seems to lend support both to the typology proposed here and to my strong emphasis on the Wagnerian heritage and the popular mixture of symbolism and communism, aspects which in 1977 were not commonly treated either in Soviet or in Western scholarship.

The reservations the book may raise in retrospect probably have to do with its limited scope. The focus on the politicised segment of the avant-garde viewed as the centre of Russian cultural life was obviously the choice of a sympathiser – a sympathiser, however, who was more interested in analysing the crisis of the movement than in proposing an uncritical reception of it. Thus the book was and still is not an attempt to write the history of the Soviet Russian theatre of the 1920s. Its composition is determined by the theme: the self-reflection of a political avant-garde art situated, roughly speaking, in a field delimited by the names of Vsevolod Meyerhold and Bertolt Brecht. The choice of both subject and method has obvious roots in the perspective of the 1970s, but this is not the only reason my book is out of tune with the current 'about-face' trend in Soviet cultural history, which proposes a general inversion of former established hierarchies and proportions and sometimes ends in little more than a new hagiography: instead of Mayakovsky – Mandelstam; instead of Meyerhold – Tairov; instead of Lenin – Berdyayev; and so on. My aim was and is not to contribute to such new hierarchy-building. If there is today a specific context to which the study of the 1920s transformations of certain avant-garde myths relates, it is probably that of the post-modernist debate.

* * *

In the preface to the first edition of this book I quoted the Swedish critic Ulf Linde, who remarked: 'What you are not able to translate, you haven't really understood.'

My friend Charles Rougle's translation of the text is based on a true understanding of the subject, and has certainly provoked me to clarify or revise a number of points. For different reasons – one of them being the geographical distance that now separates us – we have not been able to finish work on the book in the close collaboration in which it was begun.

Nevertheless, I want to thank Professor Rougle for his painstaking labours, which – once again – have helped a Swedish scholarly work appear in an English that is clearer and more intelligible than its original version, perhaps, deserves.

Also, I would like to thank Dr Richard Taylor of the University College of Swansea for reading the penultimate version of the manuscript and for providing valuable comments before it was delivered to the careful editors of Macmillan. I am especially indebted to Professor Julian Hilton, general editor of the *New Directions in Theatre* series, for his inspiring comments and patient support during the revision of the book. Any remaining flaws or obscurities, of course, are entirely my responsibility.

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L. K.