

**Book Reviews, edited by James Fisher**

**American Alternative Theatre.** By Theodore Shank. London and Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press, Ltd., 1982. xi + 202 + illus. ISBN 0-333-28883-1.

**Acrobats of the Soul. Comedy & Virtuosity in Contemporary American Theatre.** By Ron Jenkins. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1988. xx + 179 + illus. ISBN 0-930452-72-0.

**The Bread and Puppet Theatre.** By Stefan Brecht. London/New York: Methuen/Routledge, 1988. Vol. 1: 783 pp. + illus. ISBN 0-413-59890-X; Vol. 2: 813 pp. + illus. ISBN 0-413-60510-8.

**Radical People's Theatre.** By Eugène Van Erven. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988. 238 pp. + illus. ISBN 0-253-34788-2.

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the performance techniques of circus, *commedia dell'arte*, vaudeville, music hall, puppetry, and a wide variety of street entertainments and folk traditions, especially as they apply to the creation of a radical or "alternative" form of politicized theatre.

Before the early 1980's, little about this kind of theatre could be found in scholarly studies or theatrical histories and remained, as perhaps it intends, outside accepted and mainstream stage traditions. Undoubtedly, it is their non-literary style that has often kept these forms out of standard dramatic studies. Absurdist and existentialist dramatists, Bertolt Brecht, and even Dario Fo, who were inspired by many of the same aspects of street theatre, are regularly examined and re-examined, at least in part because they have individually written plays that remain in the canon of performed works. With a significant emphasis on improvisation and highly topical, ever-changing subject matter, the alternative artist or group may seem too temporary and too intangible to be pinned down in a scholarly study. With the exception of occasional articles and a few obscure volumes, radical political theatre forms in Europe and America have received too little scholarly attention, despite their contribution to social, political, and moral issues.

Lately, however, there have been several interesting attempts to examine the contributions of some of the best known political performers and groups

to appear since the early 1960's. Theodore Shank's straight-forward and scholarly *American Alternative Theatre*, Ron Jenkins' entertaining *Acrobats of the Soul*, Stefan Brecht's dense and highly detailed two-volume *The Bread and Puppet Theatre*, and Eugène Van Erven's *Radical People's Theatre*, have all appeared in the last several years and examine, in varying degrees of detail and quality, the turbulent sixties when actors and directors turned to streets and alleys, abandoned warehouses and forgotten theatres to offer unique and powerful forms of alternative political theatre. For many of these artists, such as Peter Schumann, founder of The Bread and Puppet Theater, all arts are, and must be, political:

whether they like it or not. If they stay in their own realm, preoccupied with their proper problems, the arts support the status quo, which in itself is highly political. Or they scream and kick and participate in our own country's struggle for liberation in whatever haphazard way they can, probably at the expense of some of their sensitive craftsmanship, but definitely for their own soul's sake. (f.p.)

Van Erven's *Radical People's Theatre* is a welcome international survey of the most important political theatre troupes and artists to appear in the past thirty years. Following a brief introductory chapter, Van Erven offers a hurried overview of political theatre from ancient Greece to the mid-1960's. He follows this with an examination of the social and political phenomena of the late 1960's that, as he puts it, created "a confused picture in which elements of pacifism, civil rights agitation, anti-Vietnam sentiments, sexual liberation, feminism, and other forms of anti-authoritarianism are chaotically thrown together."<sup>(15)</sup> Artists, as they have in similar times, reacted to a variety of repressions through their art.

Leading to some lucid commentary on the general characteristics of radical people's theatre, Van Erven examines in considerable depth the ideals and performances of several groups. Attention is paid to America's The San Francisco Mime Troupe, El Teatro Campesino, and The Bread and Puppet Theatre; France's Le Théâtre Populaire de Lorraine and Lo Teatre de la Carriera; Great Britain's The 7:84 Theatre Company; Germany's numerous Children and Youth theatres; Italy's Il Collettivo Teatrale La Commune; and Spain's La Cuadra de Sevilla, The Basque Provinces, Tábano, and Els Joglars. For Van Erven, these groups all share similar ideals: anti-facism, an emphasis on comedy and satire (and contemporary popular culture) as their natural language, aggressive recruitment of a working-class audience, collective creation of their works (which are extensively researched and seldom "finished" or definitive), and avoidance of similarity with conservative and bourgeois theatre forms. Van Erven vividly points out the ways in which the representative groups carry out their commitment to these ideals, but in ways that are strikingly unique and diversely connected to their individual cultures.

*Radical People's Theatre* is both evocative of the individual styles of the performers discussed and admirable in its scholarly thoroughness. It manages to survey a complex and broad-based subject in densely constructed yet highly readable prose. The book is well-illustrated with production photographs, ample notes, and an extremely useful appendix listing facts about each significant troupe including their major productions, location, budget, organizational structure, published plays, and secondary literature.

Shank's study, the first of its kind published in 1982, is similar in structure to Van Erven's later work except that he focuses exclusively on American artists and groups. In an introductory chapter he points out that

alternative theatre companies directed themselves to the new audiences, often a specific constituency such as intellectuals, artists, political radicals, workers, blacks, Chicanos, women, or gays. They explored new working methods, new techniques, and new aesthetic principles that would be in harmony with their convictions. (1)

Stressing the differences between these alternative performers and the conventional theatre, Shank organizes the groups and artists in several generic categories, juxtaposing The Living Theatre and The Open Theatre in "Primary Explorations," The San Francisco Mime Troupe and El Teatro Campesino in "Theatre of Social Change," Richard Schechner, The Performance Group, The Bread and Puppet Theatre, and Snake Theatre in "Environmental Theatre," Robert Wilson, Suzanne Hellmuth and Jock Reynolds, Alan Finneran, Soon 3, Michael Kirby, and The Structuralist Workshop in "New Formalism," and Richard Foreman, The Ontological-Hysteric Theatre, Spalding Gray and Elizabeth LeCompte, The Wooster Group, and Squat Theatre in "Self as Content." Shank offers lucid explications of individual performances, emphasizing representative examples. Admirable in its clarity, Shank's prose style occasionally fails to capture the rough, often wild, character of many of the groups. And although he identifies many similarities and differences among the performers, Shank unfortunately does not offer any concluding comments. Perhaps he felt that since most of the performers continue their work, which is constantly and necessarily in a state of flux, that no conclusion was possible. He includes useful notes and bibliographies and the volume is ample in illustrations.

As American translator of the works of Italian satirist and people's artist Dario Fo, Ron Jenkins is well-prepared to offer a study of the cross-cultural post-modern comedy that has inspired "new-wave" American performers. In *Acrobats of the Soul*, Jenkins focuses specifically on the performers who "are linked by the ingenuity with which they subversively attack the oppressive elements of every-day life in modern America." Despite the extreme diversity of the performers and groups included, Jenkins points out that they share a

special tenaciousness that results from the extraordinary rigors of contemporary life:

The forces that conspire to annihilate them reflect the complexity of our cultural environment. In addition to fighting such traditional adversaries as the pull of gravity and the constraints of authority, modern comics must confront the tyranny of mass media, technological dehumanization, political subterfuge, social alienation, rampant consumerism. Consequently they must draw on all the mental and physical resources at their disposal to emerge from the battlefield with their self-respect intact. (xi)

Jenkins's highly readable, heavily illustrated book celebrates the ancient and durable tradition of the comic form as a mocking assault on humanity's social, moral, and religious pretensions. Although he does not shy away from the political ramifications of their works, Jenkins sees these performers as most particularly interested in creating the individually human act of response to a world spinning out of control. In short, astute essays, attention is paid to the diverse performance styles of Penn and Teller, Paul Zaloom, Le Cirque du Soleil, Spalding Gray, the Big Apple Circus, Stephen Wade, Pickle Family Circus, Avner the Eccentric, The Flying Karamazov Brothers, and Bill Irwin. Whether it be through verbal satire, slapstick clowning, music, circus, acrobatics, magic, or mime, Jenkins reaches for, and repeatedly finds, a profound vein of human absurdity in the performances of these artists.

With such verbally skilled performers as Spalding Gray or Penn and Teller, Jenkins is able to add some of the artist's own most telling comments or excerpts from their acts. Although no book could do justice to the rambunctious physical comedy of Bill Irwin or The Flying Karamazov Brothers, the excellent performance photographs laced through Jenkins' essays, go some distance in capturing moments of their lunatic spirit.

Jenkins does not include bibliographies of books and articles on these artists or a listing of film and television appearances (which would certainly have been a welcome resource), but he offers a fascinating chronicle of contemporary developments in subversive comedy from the current generation in a long line of clowns stretching from Aristophanes to Dario Fo.

Perhaps the most valuable contribution among these works is Stefan Brecht's exhaustive two-volume, heavily annotated history of The Bread and Puppet Theatre. Part of a series of books on revolutionary theatres in America between 1963 and 1973, Brecht begins his study with the social conditions and early life in Germany of Peter Schumann, the founder and driving force of The Bread and Puppet Theatre, and, as Brecht proclaims, the inventor "of a magnificent new medium, the 'live puppet' show or 'puppet masque'." (1) Brecht suggests that Schumann began his work in theatre and with puppets in search of a spiritual regeneration of mankind as his aim.

Schumann came to America in the early 1960's with an interest in dance and sculpture, but soon turned back to puppetry as his medium. He worked toward an expanded form of puppetry by beginning with masked performances and, during the early and mid-sixties, he continued experimentation with puppet making, religious observances incorporating theatrical ritual, and children's theatre. The heightening Vietnam War and the Peace Movement amplified the political content of Schumann's work, and in the early 1970's, with the decline of the Peace Movement, Schumann reconstructed his work in an attempt to reach "real America." During the later 1970's and throughout the 1980's Schumann and his actors have lived communally on a farm in Vermont where they have worked on and performed modern morality plays and "resurrection" circuses that have celebrated nature and condemned the values of an aggressive and commercial society and the threat of apocalypse in the atomic age.

In nearly 1,600 well-illustrated pages, Brecht traces the development of Schumann's performance techniques and political commitment. He includes a staggering amount of material, including portions of plays, plans for performances, music, sketches of masks and puppets, comments by other artists, Schumann's company, and Schumann himself. The illustrations are necessary and occasionally capture extraordinary images, such as one at a 1982 Nuclear Freeze demonstration depicting Death on horseback.

The content of these four books intersect on many levels, but, more significantly, they illuminate the highly diverse forms that performing artists have discovered to respond to a complex and frightening world. Although it may be true that after the early 1970's the most energized era of politicized theatre had past, the continued work of many of these performers suggests that artists will continue, in troubled times, to expend their art in the service of change.

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**Harold Prince and the American Musical Theatre.** By Foster Hirsch Cambridge University Press, 1989. 187 pp.

**Harold Prince: From Pajama Game to Phantom of the Opera.** By Carol Ilson UMI Research Press, 1989. 409 pp.

Like his mentor George Abbott, director and producer Hal Prince has focused his attention almost exclusively on the commercial Broadway Theatre. Long after nearly all of his contemporaries have disappeared, Prince tenaciously continues to embrace the Broadway musical theatre which Abbott helped

create. And, like Abbott, Prince strives to give an audience its money's worth. He possesses a distinctive ability to craft shows with an unmistakably theatrical panache and flair. But Prince's contribution to the American theatre goes far beyond the making of hit musicals. Over the years Hal Prince has created a body of work imprinted with a singular stylistic vision. Despite his insistence that he is "glaringly inconsistent" (his own book is called *Contradictions*), Prince has consistently engaged his audience with the musical theatre form in ways that stridently avoid formula. Nearly all of Prince's work as a director can be considered progressive, but several of his shows (*Cabaret*, *Company*, *Follies*, *Pacific Overtures*, *Candide*, *Evita*) have significantly broadened the musical theatre form, often transcending the barriers which have traditionally existed between it and serious drama or opera.

Often imitated but seldom surpassed, Prince has managed to continue working on Broadway through two decades of its "demise." With *Phantom of the Opera* and talk of an imminent new Sondheim collaboration, he remains--twenty-five years after *Cabaret*--the hottest director in town.

In his excellent book *Harold Prince and the American Musical Theatre*, Foster Hirsch reports that in the mid-seventies *The New York Times Magazine* rejected three assigned articles on Hal Prince (by Mel Gussow, Susan Braudy, and Gerald Walker) because the writers "couldn't find a lively story." According to Hirsch, Prince replied "they simply found me boring, and I'm proud of that, particularly in these days."

Approaching his subject, Hirsch wisely avoids digging for lively Broadway gossip and focuses instead on presenting a study of Prince's work, beginning with *Cabaret* in 1966. Hirsch chooses to consider Prince's career within the context of the history of the American musical theatre. He begins by including a brief but useful study of the origins and evolution of the musical, highlighting its early conventions and their lasting influence on the musicals which followed. Hirsch's central thesis is a valid one: that Prince, like other innovative directors of the 20th century, possesses an acute awareness of the theatrical conventions which predate him, and his work is always, in some way, a conscious reaction to these conventions. But unlike other director/reformers (such as Brecht, whose influence seems apparent in Prince's work, though Prince denies any specific impact), Prince simultaneously embraces and rejects the idiomatic elements of traditional musical theatre. As Hirsch puts it,

Pumping serious meaning into a form that has traditionally thrived on fizz, Prince approaches the musical not with airy academic notions but as a practical theatre man who received his training on the job, from the pragmatic George Abbott, whose basic principles of giving the customers good value while protecting his backers' investment he shares. . . . While acknowledging, indeed celebrating, the musical's inherent artifice, Prince and his collaborators have at the same time explored ways of extending its theatrical signature.

Unquestionably, the most significant figure in Prince's career has been the legendary Abbott, and Hirsch devotes a chapter to "the Abbott touch" and its influence on Prince. Hirsch writes that despite their differences in temperament and artistic tastes, Prince has modeled his career on Abbott's example. Prince's work ethic and discipline, his canny sense of timing and pace, and his habit of searching for the "arc" of a show are all attributed to Abbott. And it was with Abbott's blessing that Prince eventually left the fold to produce *West Side Story* and *Fiddler on the Roof*, two productions very much outside the Abbott tradition, and indicative of the kind of theatre Prince had decided to pursue.

A definite highlight of Hirsch's book is his documentation of Prince's work on two productions of *Cabaret*, both the original in 1966 and the 1987 revival. Hirsch explains how various stylistic signatures associated with Prince (on-stage observers, fluid movement, scenic metaphors, the use of a framing device to comment on the action) were first conceived and implemented in *Cabaret*. Here, Prince appears constantly to be striving for a more truthful, less conventional way of stimulating his audience. He wants a Sally Bowles who doesn't sing well and will never be a star; he wants the "limbo" numbers to run completely against the grain of conventional musical-theatre staging; he wants to connect his contemporary audience with the Berlin of 1930. As librettist Joe Masteroff said, *Cabaret* was a show "written by a committee", but as Hirsch points out it was Prince who gave the show its essential structure and style.

Hirsch covers in some detail Prince's collaboration with Masteroff and designer Boris Aronson. Here, as throughout the book, Hirsch maintains an even, detached tone; however, he doesn't avoid making such pointed observations as: "*Cabaret* has a split focus. It is a schizophrenic show in which the spiky metaphoric frame and the literal narrative are sometimes at cross-purposes," and "Ron Field's choreography stays closer to Las Vegas than Berlin." That *Cabaret* was a landmark musical and probably Prince's most imitated work, Hirsch clearly documents; but he admits (as does Prince) that ultimately the weakness of the conventional libretto prevented *Cabaret* from succeeding at the level Prince intended.

The picture of Prince which Hirsch paints is of a gifted, energetic, and savvy man of the theatre with a vision of the musical as an art form. As Prince tells Hirsch, "Abbott doesn't care about posterity, and neither for that matter does Steve Sondheim. I do. . . . I want to leave a mark, to do something of artistic value." But as Hirsch's book convincingly illustrates, the most accurate portrait of Prince is that of a dedicated collaborator. Unlike many of his contemporaries (Jerome Robbins, Michael Bennett, Bob Fosse) Prince has always relied heavily on collaborators. Composer, lyricists, librettists, and designers assume creative roles in determining the production scheme for a Prince-directed musical. Though as Hirsch points out, Prince is

always in charge, he continually seeks to surround himself with the most talented people he can find.

Consequently, it comes as no surprise that Prince entered his most prolific and successful period (the 70's) when he began working with Sondheim, a man as energized by the collaborative process as Prince himself. Three chapters are devoted to the Prince-Sondheim musicals (*Company* (1970), *Follies* (1971), *A Little Night Music* (1973), *Pacific Overtures* (1976), *Sweeney Todd* (1979), *Merrily We Roll Along* (1981)). As Hirsch reports, ". . . the Prince-Sondheim team may not always have fulfilled their thematic intentions but each time out they have succeeded in shattering preconceptions about the Broadway musical." Comprising the centerpiece of the book, the Sondheim chapters provide an insightful look at Sondheim's beginnings and his work on Broadway since *West Side Story*. Hirsch examines Prince's process of working with Sondheim and includes numerous candid, and often self-effacing comments from Sondheim: "I'm an imitator . . . I'm a pasticheur," and "I think Hal and I have come in for such hostility because we're mavericks and yet we're not starving." Both Prince and Sondheim appear to have spoken with Hirsch at length, and each has contributed a foreword to the book.

Hirsch concludes by assessing Prince's musical failures in the early 80's (*Merrily We Roll Along*, *A Doll's Life*, *Grind*) and examines Prince's recent work in opera and his collaborations with Andrew Lloyd Webber (*Evita*, *Phantom of the Opera*). Hirsch suggests that Prince, having suffered a dry spell on Broadway, may have been perceived as unable to keep up with the British "concept musical" directors (such as Trevor Nunn) whose work clearly imitates many of Prince's staging ideas. Hirsch writes,

If Prince directing a Lloyd Webber show in London was something of a test, it was one he easily passed: his production radiated an invigorating theatrical imagination, and with his spectacularly well-crafted work Prince was back where he has always wanted to be, at the heart of the commercial theatre that he has served for forty years. (173)

Hirsch has contributed a concise and valuable study of an American theatre innovator whose ideas have transformed and broadened a genre desperate for rebirth.

In his foreword to Carol Ilson's *Harold Prince: From Pajama Game to Phantom of the Opera*, Sheldon Harnick calls the book a "treasure trove." To be sure, the book is packed with information on Prince--at 443 pages and 20 chapters it is more than twice as long as Hirsch's book. Impeccably researched and notated (there are no fewer than 1,163 notes to the text--148 in one chapter alone), Ilson's book carefully traces Prince's professional life beginning with his first job on a George Abbott television project in 1948.



Ilson claims that Prince's early ambition was to be a playwright, but his experience working for Abbott led him toward producing. Even as a fledgling producer Prince offered suggestions to the creative team of *The Pajama Game*, such as how to integrate a time sequence into the lyrics of the song "7 1/2 Cents." Prince also had a clever way of rewarding investors in his shows. According to Ilson, he over-capitalized his shows so that the day after opening each backer received a check for 20% of his investment along with the reviews. This was a policy Prince continued with subsequent hits.

Ilson points out that Prince's near-immediate success as a producer was largely due to his partnership with Robert Griffith, under the wing of Abbott. Griffith had been an actor and stage manager for Abbott before opening a production office with Prince, who was 22 years younger than Griffith. The two possessed completely opposite temperaments: Griffith easygoing and shy, Prince more volatile and impulsive; nevertheless they worked together with uncanny success--producing *The Pajama Game*, *Damn Yankees*, *New Girl in Town*, *West Side Story*, and *Fiorello*--until Griffith's untimely death in 1961. Ilson writes that Griffith had objected to Prince's desire to direct and that Griffith's death while a personal blow to Prince, gave him the chance to finally direct a musical of his own: *She Loves Me* in 1963.

It is possible to admire the quality and scope of Ilson's research into Hal Prince's remarkable career. But one might easily quiver at the overwhelming number of textual citations in the book, which both highlight her subject and threaten to overwhelm her own authorial voice. Going chronologically from one show to the next, Ilson settles into a predictable pattern of documenting how each musical was conceived, mounted, and received by critics and audiences. Ironically, Ilson's frequent quotations tend to camouflage her own rather plodding writing style. Interspersed throughout the book are engaging and enlightening passages from Abbott, Lisa (Mrs. Boris) Aronson, Patricia Birch, Michael Crawford, Fred Ebb, Joe Masteroff, Sondheim, Hugh Wheeler, Prince himself, and many others.

Ilson's most interesting chapter deals with Prince's string of failures in the early 1980s. As Ilson explains, these productions took their toll on Prince's career. Having never experienced a prolonged "hitless streak", Prince was forced to close his production office and began hiring himself out as a director. Spiraling costs and fewer musicals, labor disputes and soaring ticket prices created an environment Prince considered hostile to creativity. Ilson presents a picture of a depressed but remarkably clear-sighted Prince during these years. She includes a particularly forthright passage from an interview with Prince after the failure of *Grind*.

I had patronage all those years. That's what it really amounts to. I raised \$250,000 via one-letter-offering sent to 176 people, most of whom invested \$1,000. They were undoubtedly as proud of the adventurous failure as they were of the success. For \$1,000 they had

a piece of *Follies*. When a show made money, of course they were thrilled. When it lost, they seemed genuinely interested in what we had attempted. Nobody interfered. There were so many of them. Nobody asked to read a script. Nobody wanted a drink at Gallagher's after a preview to express how he'd fix the show. Today the same show costs \$8 million and anybody who is going to put up that kind of money feels he has a right to that drink at Gallagher's . . . All of this clearly compromises the quality of art. You can't experiment. You can't *lose*. (332)

Ilson briefly discusses Prince's influences, noting that Prince's expressed debt to Meyerhold and Piscator appear to be only in retrospect. Meyerhold's production of *The Inspector General* is mentioned as a precursor to Prince's work on *Evita*, but Prince claims to have been unaware of Meyerhold's production until well after *Evita*. Brief reference is also made to Prince's influence on contemporary directors such as Trevor Nunn, Tommy Tune, and the late Michael Bennett. Critic Frank Rich is quoted as bemoaning the fact that Prince's innovative stage techniques have become musical theatre clichés in the hands of inferior, imitative directors.

Ilson concludes by suggesting that Prince may abandon Broadway altogether in favor of London or regional theatre. He has optioned the novel *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, and plans a musical version with a score by Kander and Ebb and a book by Terrence McNally. He also intends to continue his recent forays into opera, with a new production of *Faust* slated for the Metropolitan Opera in February 1990.

In many ways the Hirsch and Ilson books are perfect complements to each other--Ilson's comprehensive and factual, Hirsch's selective and analytical. Ilson painstakingly documents every production of Prince's theatrical career, providing valuable details on the conception and execution of each Prince project. Unlike Hirsch, Ilson chooses not to offer much critical insight into any of Prince's productions, nor does she attempt, as Hirsch does, to place Prince's work in any historical perspective. Hirsch, on the other hand, does an admirable job of measuring Prince's artistic achievements and assessing his impact on the musical theatre form, but he makes no effort to recount the details of Prince's rise as a producer, and he avoids protracted analyses of Prince's musical failures. Together, the two books succeed in providing a satisfying and reliable study of an American theatre innovator whose ideas have transformed and broadened a genre desperate for rebirth. As the demise of the musical continues to be proclaimed, one can only hope "the Prince of Broadway" will lead us to another heyday.

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