

Liberal paradoxes

ERIC BENTLEY :
Theatre of War
 Comments on 32 Occasions
 428pp. Methuen. £3.75.

Eric Bentley's books tend to go by robustly confident titles which somehow get drowned in the text. *What is Theatre?* The book tells you a good many things but not that. *Theatre of Commitment* again does nothing to prepare you for the nervously sceptical essays within. And so again in the case of this new collection.

Theatre of War consists of a selection of substantial pieces written over the past 20 years, arranged under three headings so as to imply a governing pattern. Mr Bentley divides the material into "The Life of Modern Drama", "The Drama of Modern Life", and "Living Theatre in a Dying World". To adopt his own habit of self-questioning argument, is there anything more in this than semantic juggling?

Yes there is; but, the sense of mere word-play persists. Mr Bentley at his worst writes like a man with no convictions, no personality, and small feelings; who tries to remedy these deficiencies by spinning logical webs. There is always something else to be said; always yet another argument on the other side. Rarely a moment of repose, or the satisfying sensation of seeing a nail hit squarely on the head.

Still, there is real substance in the organization of this book. Mr Bentley has been writing and lecturing on the theatre for over twenty-five years. It is an exhausting job, as the drained spectres of so many middle-aged critics verify. Added to which Mr Bentley's country is America, where there exists a belittling relationship between the drama of the professional theatre and the drama of public events. Always present, this contrast has become momentarily insistent over the past decade. Where does this leave a drama critic who has spent his career penned to aisle seats and podiums?

What *Theatre of War* exhibits is the struggle of a drama critic to enlarge his role; asserting his rights to tackle the political scene, great and small; and attempting to devise for himself a new professional position on this wider basis. Mr Bentley has always treated politics as a legitimate part of his craft, though his own position has often seemed queasily undefined. But towards the end of the 1960s his position hardened; partly in response to the 1968 student riots at Columbia where he had a long attachment as Brander Matthews Professor. One fruit of this was his edition of the House Un-American Activities Committee hearings, *Thirty Years of Treason*. Outside the critical field, he launched a New York political cabaret, with Isaiah Sheffer, called the DMZ (De-Militarized Zone). In one of the essays here he touches on this venture and quotes one of its songs:

We turn from protest to resistance
 Since all our protests came to naught.
 Since all our protests came to naught
 We turn from protest to resistance.

Even equipped with a Stefan Wolpe

tune, it is hard to imagine that doing much to cement the morale of patrons at the Village Vanguard. From description, in fact, the DMZ sounds less like an active political enterprise than an academic reconstruction of the Berlin 1920s.

Mr Bentley himself would probably rank that as a mark in its favour. He believes in the word; he believes in the written dramatic tradition, and in the continued force of the classics as a radical force. But this is a hard position to sustain in America today, where the younger radicals have famously cast all the traditional cargo overboard: the word, the separation of spectators from spectacle, and indeed the whole process of argument by conjecture and refutation which hitherto has sustained the life of drama and criticism alike.

It therefore follows that while Mr Bentley still writes extensively

tical private individual confronting groups who have achieved a sense of common purpose.

All this is merely to suggest that he writes like a man in a tight spot. It does not invalidate the ingenuity and wealth of knowledge with which he seeks to escape it. The book contains some of the most thoughtful writing on Pirandello yet to appear on either side of the Atlantic, in which he reconstructs the fragmented dramas underlying *Right You Are* and *Six Characters in Search of an Author* and shows how and why Pirandello smashed them up and reconstituted them within his enlarged theatrical structures. From a psychological, as well as a theatrical point of view, he makes out a strong case for an apostolic succession from Ibsen to Shaw and Brecht, incidentally following up the intricate parallels between *Major Bar-*

HARTMUT LANGE :
Theaterstücke 1^e
 341pp. Hamburg. J. Bohn. DM 8.

If domicile had any say in the matter, Hartmut Lange, who left East Germany in 1965, would count as a West German dramatist. Moreover, such recognition as he has had—and it has been on a small scale—has been in West Germany; in East Germany his plays remain unperformed. But he sees himself as an exile and his work, most of which dates from after 1965, indeed does not reflect his change of address: West German problems, even West German brands of Marxism do not seem to compete with the problems raised by Marxism seen in practice, problems grounded in Lange's experience of the early 1960s.

There is in this a kind of delayed reaction and the plays here collected in fact show the distancing effects of this exile, notably in the way in which problems of a raw, practical kind yield with the passage of time to issues stated more generally, more conceptually, and set at a remove from actuality. Such a change in course has its parallels in East Germany itself, in the trend towards historicism or neo-classicism, in the remodelling of existing, often classical plots by, for example, Heiner Müller and Peter Hacks.

Lange's first two plays, *Senftenberger Erzählungen* (1960) and *Marski* (1963), stay close to observed reality, the reality of an emerging collective economy. Both have the cameos, the underplotted character-sketches of the *Volksstück*, a genre exemplified by Brecht's *Puntilla*, whose eponymous "hero" looms particularly large behind Lange's gross, guzzling, protean capitalist *Marski*. Both Lange's plays state, but do not over-state, the antagonisms, steering clear of didacticism and not letting the central conflict between private enterprise and collectivization overwhelm a lively, domesticated foreground.

Lange's third play, *Der Hundsprozess* (1964), follows a very different line. Disenchantment has plainly set in and finds expression in an allegorical unmasking of Stalinism, attacked frontally through tirades and obliquely through a ritualized choreography of indoctrination. Even here Lange remains close enough to events to preserve hints of polemic, but in the companion-piece, *Herakles*, written after he had left East Germany, the vestiges of topicality have gone. The result is a statement in stark and argumentative terms of what is to become Lange's principal theme: the variability of truth, the fact that truths can be stage-managed, the fact that truths and lies are decisions of policy, not exclusive categories.

The making of a lie into a truth is, of course, a political gesture. To this extent Lange's plays do not lose political edge. At the same time he remains provokingly open-minded on the moral issues. Thus in the siege of Troy Odysseus is shown institutionalizing untruth, sanctioned by the pressure of events (*Die Ermordung des Aias*). So too, in his version of Kleist's

story "Die Marquise von O", here entitled *Die Gräfin von Rathenow*, the heroine, wrongly suspected of impropriety with a servant, lives out the lie by making a truth of it, spending a fortnight in bed with him. Where compromises of this order are not made the consequence is not conventional heroics—Trotsky (*Trotzki in Coyoacan*) is shown in his last hours uselessly preserving what he sees as pure nuggets of historical truth in the face of murderous threats on his own life.

The risk for the theatre in all this is that the issue may take precedence and drain a conflict of dramatic life. The contorted truth-falsehood motif in *Die Ermordung des Aias* is such a case; is the obsessive testing of truth in *Herakles* another. Humour, at times macabre, at times burlesque, saves *Die Gräfin von Rathenow* from the same fate. Most recently *Staschek oder das Leben des Ovid*, here published for the first time, injects a certain knockabout vividness into what might easily have become a cerebral affair. The spectacle of the Roman poets, Horace in particular, saving their skins by selling their souls to whoever is in power is witnessed and dissected by Staschek, a character who also figures (the backward look is significant and perhaps promising) in the early play *Marski*. He is plebeian, shrewd but not stereotyped, and his worm's-eye view of the compromises exacted by high politics and high poetics yields a comic incongruity which gives proportion and actuality to the questions raised, not least when he is joined by Vladimir and Estragon, still waiting for Godot.

Lange's predicament—adrift between two systems, living in one and obsessed with the other—is an interesting one. But an eccentric course like this needs charting and here this edition is irresponsible: no information whatsoever is offered, the plays are not dated, sources, performances, revisions are not mentioned. Even the title, inasmuch as it hints at completeness, is misleading—apart from the version of *King John*, included here, Lange has written versions of *Richard III*, *Tartuffe*, and *The Alchemist*.

The tercentenary of Molière's death in February, 1673, is an appropriate occasion for assessing his immediate predecessors on the comic scene. Roger Guichemerre's chosen dates—in *La Comédie avant Molière 1640-1660* (415pp. Paris: Armand Colin. 69fr)—exclude most of Pierre Corneille's comedies, but bring in work of his brother Thomas, Scarron and, above all, Cyrano de Bergerac, to whom Molière owed more than is generally recognized. This interesting, thorough, but somewhat repetitious study gives an exhaustive and clear account of the characters, plots, language and other resources familiar to the theatregoer of Molière's early days, and available to Molière himself. M Guichemerre enables Molière's originality to be seen much more clearly but, more importantly, does justice to plays and playwrights who deserve respect on their own account.

Separations XVIII

A February of the merely real,
 plumbers, not bayonets, outside the door,
 colds, personal despair. I wrote, "The war
 is far away," back to Perine Place reel-
 ing and sick with tear-gas from a taut
 poets-cum-journalists' soiree. The shades
 were drawn. We joked about the barricades
 listening to gunfire. I got caught
 by a bugmask's canister on Haight.
 Sinecured exiles with unfunny eyes
 converge on the Cultural Attaché's
 free whisky, playing Corner Points for praise.
 It's hard to tell the poets from the spies.
 The war is far away. Will wait, will wait.

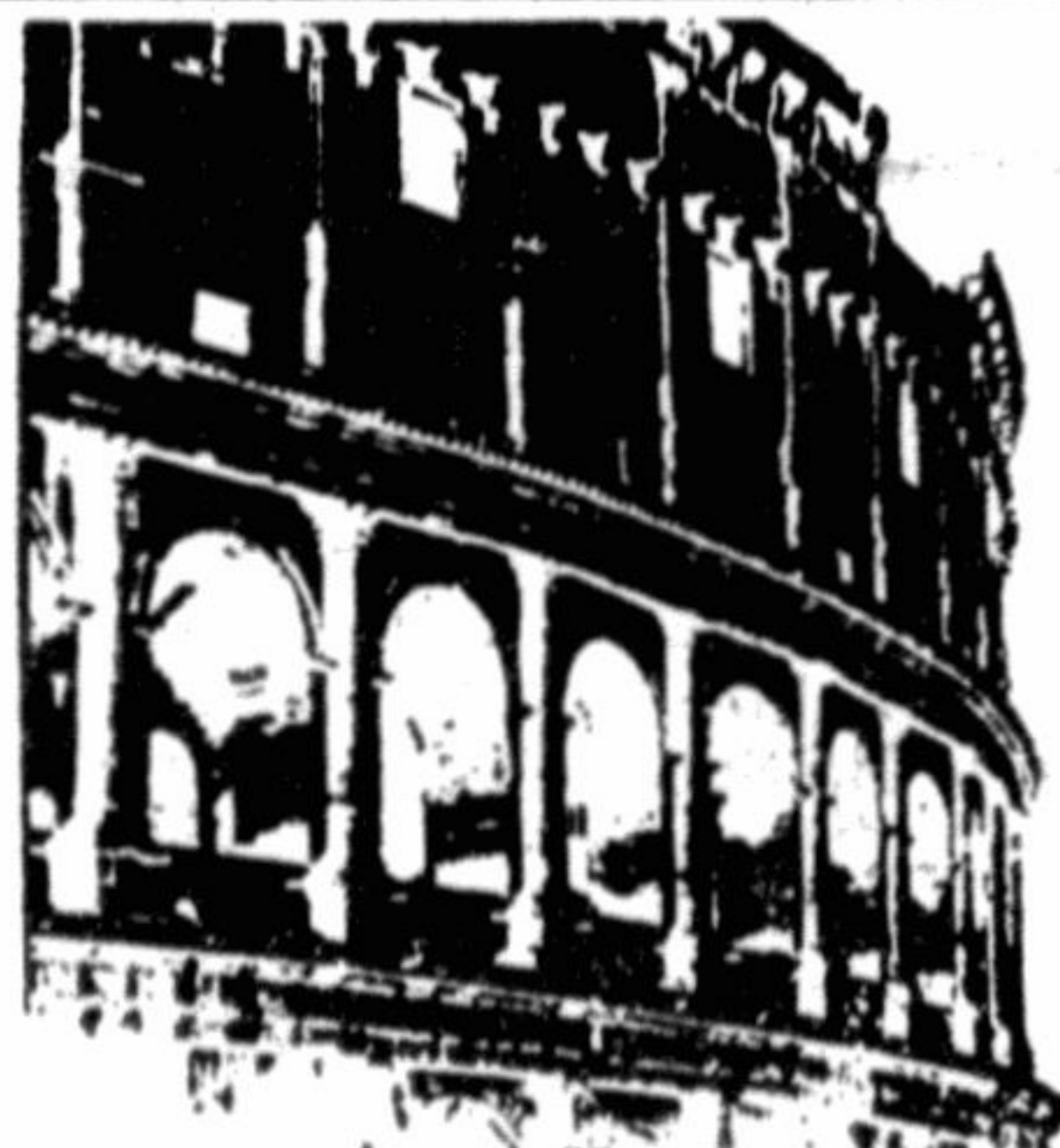
MARILYN HACKER

and with continuing insight of his old gods, Shaw, Brecht and (to a lesser extent) Ibsen, he has very little to say in favour of current icons of the avant-garde. The Living Theatre is put down for trying to rape the public; Grotowski is put down for arrogance and an inferior prose style, before receiving guarded recognition on grounds of his conservatism; nude theatre, therapeutic theatre, Black theatre get short shrift. All for excellent, closely argued reasons. The complaint that recurs most insistently is that the offender has abandoned dialectical thought. Dialectics is a holy word with Mr Bentley; it offers a cast-iron, and indeed revolutionary, pretext for never making up your mind about anything. One is left, in reading the later sections of the book, to view Mr Bentley's attitude as the instinctive revulsion of a scap-

bara and *St Joan of the Stockyards* so as to illuminate the authors' fundamental political divergence:

For Shaw, the target is the person who will exonerate the system by characterizing the businessman as bad. For Brecht, the target is the person who will exonerate the system by characterizing the businessman as "human"

An activist in the academic context, and an academic among the radicals, Mr Bentley—to use one of his most overworked words—is a paradox. A familiar liberal paradox, perhaps. But at least for lovers of the drama it is a good thing that he is still at it; and his dramatic criticism would not be what it is without his thoughts on the politics of Columbia University and Robert Lowell's relationship with the White House, and even the DMZ.



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