

DOCUMENTARY THEATRE IN GERMANY TODAY

Dr. Lothar Lutze

Present-day German literature was born out of silence. The year 1945 had brought the end of World War II with its millions of dead; the gates of the concentration camps had opened to a horrified world; the atom bomb had vanguarded a new era of destruction. For Germany it was Zero Hour more than for any other country, because she had emerged from the war both as one of the main accused and one of the main victims. The nation of Dürer, Bach, Goethe had given a devastating demonstration of how quickly her 'depth' could be converted into an abyss of evil.

How could art, music, literature and, along with it, the theatre ever come to life again in the face of this reality? Especially literature: for it depended on words, and words had been misused, defiled, castrated as instruments of propaganda; and writers, if they had not decided to emigrate (Brecht) or to give up writing altogether, had themselves become instruments in the hands of politicians. The German language lay exhausted, burnt-out, a heap of ashes.

Germany's economic recovery is by some considered a miracle. That she should ever become articulate again is the greater miracle. But old writers returned, and new ones came up, hesitatingly, gropingly, grown suspicious of their own profession. In short, modern German literature was, and has been to this day, somewhere essentially anti-literary.

Playwrights took more time than the others to come into their own again. Wolfgang Borchert's "Out There Before The Door", written under the immediate impact of the war, was a lonely outcry. This slowness of

recovery may have partly been due to the nature of dramatic writing itself, but also to the fact that Germany, after its literary isolation between 1933 and 1945, was now trying to make up for what it had missed by literally swallowing, in translation, whatever plays could be imported from abroad. Although this delayed, in a way, the development of post-war German drama, it saved it from being provincial.

Broadly speaking, three possible ways offered themselves to the German playwright after 1945 to break the silence :

the escape into entertainment—but, unfortunately perhaps, entertainment has never been considered quite ‘up to the mark’ in German literature, and so this field has been left almost exclusively to theatrical imports from abroad;

the ‘absurd’ theatre with its offer of artistic freedom to the author—Wolfgang Hildesheimer has tried his hand at it, and so has, to a certain extent, Peter Weiss by transferring his “Marat” into a lunatic asylum; and

the factual, or documentary’s theatre—quite opposed to the ‘freedom’ of the ‘absurd’ theatre, it means engagement, political engagement in particular. But this engagement is quite different from Brecht’s, many of whose techniques are utilized by the documentary theatre, but whose attitude of pedagogic idealism is largely considered a failure by the post-war generation of playwrights. In these “scenic reports on the basis of documentary material” (Horst Müller) the playwright becomes more and more merely the *arrangeur*, the organizer of his documentary raw-material; ideally speaking, political ‘change’ (Henning Rischbieter : “Veränderung”) is to be brought about by confronting the audience with reality ; the reality of the middle of our century, which, as is felt by many, seems to defy artistic (and in particular theatrical) re-creation.

Documentary theatre is certainly not a discovery of the sixties. Already in the first third of this century, ‘Modern Objectivity’ (‘Neue Sachlichkeit’) brought with it a number of dramatic reports and documentary plays, such as those by Friedrich Wolf and Peter Martin Lampel, which “reduced the author’s role to the stageworthy arrangement of facts” (Siegfried Melchinger). Their tendency was political throughout : Erwin Piscator’s “Political Theatre” was published in 1929.

As was to be expected after 1945, it is again politics that has pro-

vided post-war German documentary plays their common theme : political responsibility. Their development is characterised by a gradual and steady withdrawal of the author and, consequently, by a movement away from art towards reality. This is also a movement away from Brecht, whose 'epic' theatre is very determinedly an author's theatre : the dramatist fully exercises the additional rights resulting from the epic writer's traditional omnipresence and omniscience. Brecht's is also an artistic theatre and both its literary importance and its ideological failure are due to this fact.

An early attempt to dramatize Germany's immediate past was "The Devil's General" by Carl Zuckmayer, that master-craftsman of dramatic writing. It is a play on Air Force General Udet's death during the war, extremely skilfully done and successful on the stage, but thoroughly conventional.

There is some irony in the fact, that apart from Brecht, Germany's first post-war contribution to the world theatre, Rolf Hochhuth's "Representative", is not at all great literature. It is also quite a conventionally though skilfully built play elaborating documentary material on Pope Pius XII's disputable attitude in the face of the Nazi persecution of the Jews. Its success, in Germany and abroad, was largely sensational and due to the fact that here the question of responsibility was raised in connection with the head of the Catholic Church, a figure largely beyond criticism till then. But the play was bound to be a failure the moment it tried to depict the horrors of Auschwitz with conventional means (Act V).

Heinar Kipphardt's "Oppenheimer" was one of the most successful plays during the 1964/65 season and well into the present one. Its theme: the political responsibility of the scientist. As a documentary play, it is certainly a step forward. The author's 'interference' is even less noticeable, the result is greater homogeneity, conflict is immanent—in short, it proves that anti-literary theatre need not be anti-theatre. Kipphardt's next attempt at the documentary theatre, "Joel Brand", a play on the Nazis' historical proposal to barter Jews against lorries, was less successful.

Peter Weiss, the author of "Marat", also became the *arrangeur* of a documentary play, "The Inquiry". On October 19th, 1965, there were simultaneous first performances of the play in West and East Berlin, in Cologne, Essen, Leipzig, Munich, Rostock and other cities both in West and East Germany, about a dozen in all—certainly something unique in the theatrical as well as the political life of post-war Germany. It was the second attempt to put Auschwitz on the stage. After

Hochhuth's obvious failure to do so, how did Weiss go about trying the next-to-impossible?

The techniques he employs may be considered the concerted efforts to 'de-dramatize' the subject-matter:

by "filtering" the material through a trial-scene (Horst Müller)—the 'play' is based entirely on Bernd Naumann's Records of the Auschwitz Trial, long passages of which are quoted almost literally. The immediate impact of what happened in the camp is resolved into question and answer, affirmation and denial, argument and counter-argument;

by concentration—in producing the play, no attempt should be made to reconstruct the court on the stage; it appears impossible to the playwright, just as the representation of the camp itself would be impossible. "Hundreds of witnesses appeared in the court. The confrontation of witness and defendant as well as the arguments and counter-arguments were overcharged with emotional forces. Of all this only a concentrated statement can remain on the stage" (Peter Weiss);

by creating 'distance'—not so much Brecht's epic distance as what might be called musical distance. Weiss calls his play an 'oratorio'; the subject-matter is arranged in 'cantos' (Weiss has been working on a play based on Dante's "Divina Commedia" for some time now)—Canto of the Platform, Canto of the Camp, Canto of the Swing, Canto of the Possibility of Survival, etc.; the language is cast into slow, inconspicuous, almost monotonously even, yet faintly musical verse;

by the use of irony, occasionally with a Brechtian touch, *vide* the conclusion of the play:

Today
as our nation has again
toiled itself up
into a leading position
we should worry about other things
than about accusations
which should have been considered
void long ago
Loud approval from the defendants

by avoiding direct conflict through generalization—although

the eighteen defendants bear names "taken over from the actual trial", they "are not to be accused once again in the play. They merely lend the writer of the play their names, which are used as symbols here" (Peter Weiss). The play is an 'inquiry' into the responsibility of a whole people :

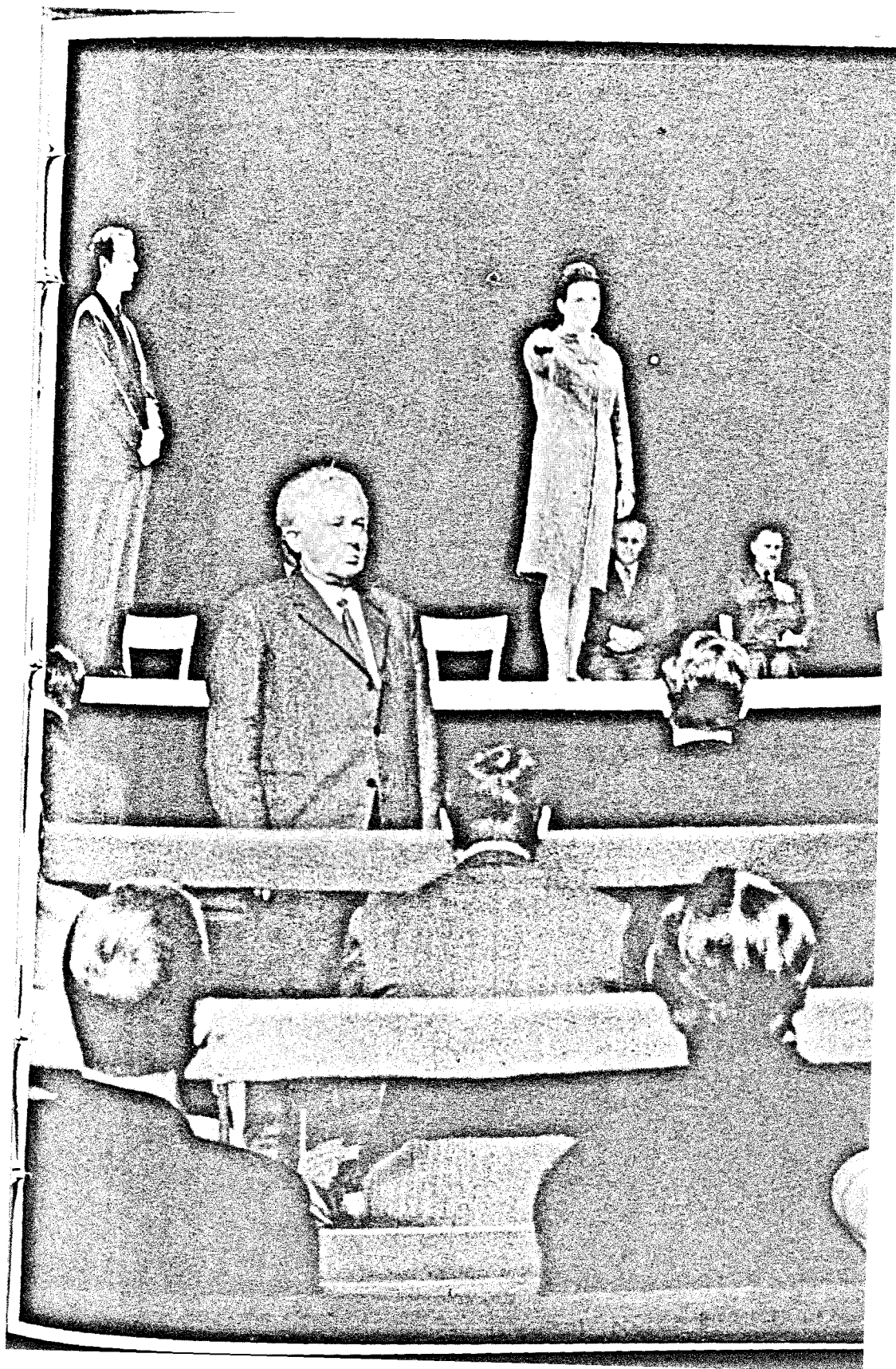
WITNESS 7 : I only request
the permission to point out
how closely the street was lined with spectators
when they drove us from our dwellings
and loaded us into the cattle-vans
The defendants in this trial
are the mere navvies
at the very end.

The nine witnesses in the play remain anonymous. They "only report what hundreds expressed" (Peter Weiss). At one point, even the distinction between the guards and the guarded becomes meaningless, and the whole nightmare an ironic aspect of tragic world theatre — as Horst Müller observes, it may have been this passage that induced Palitzsch in Stuttgart to have defendants and witnesses represented by the same actors :

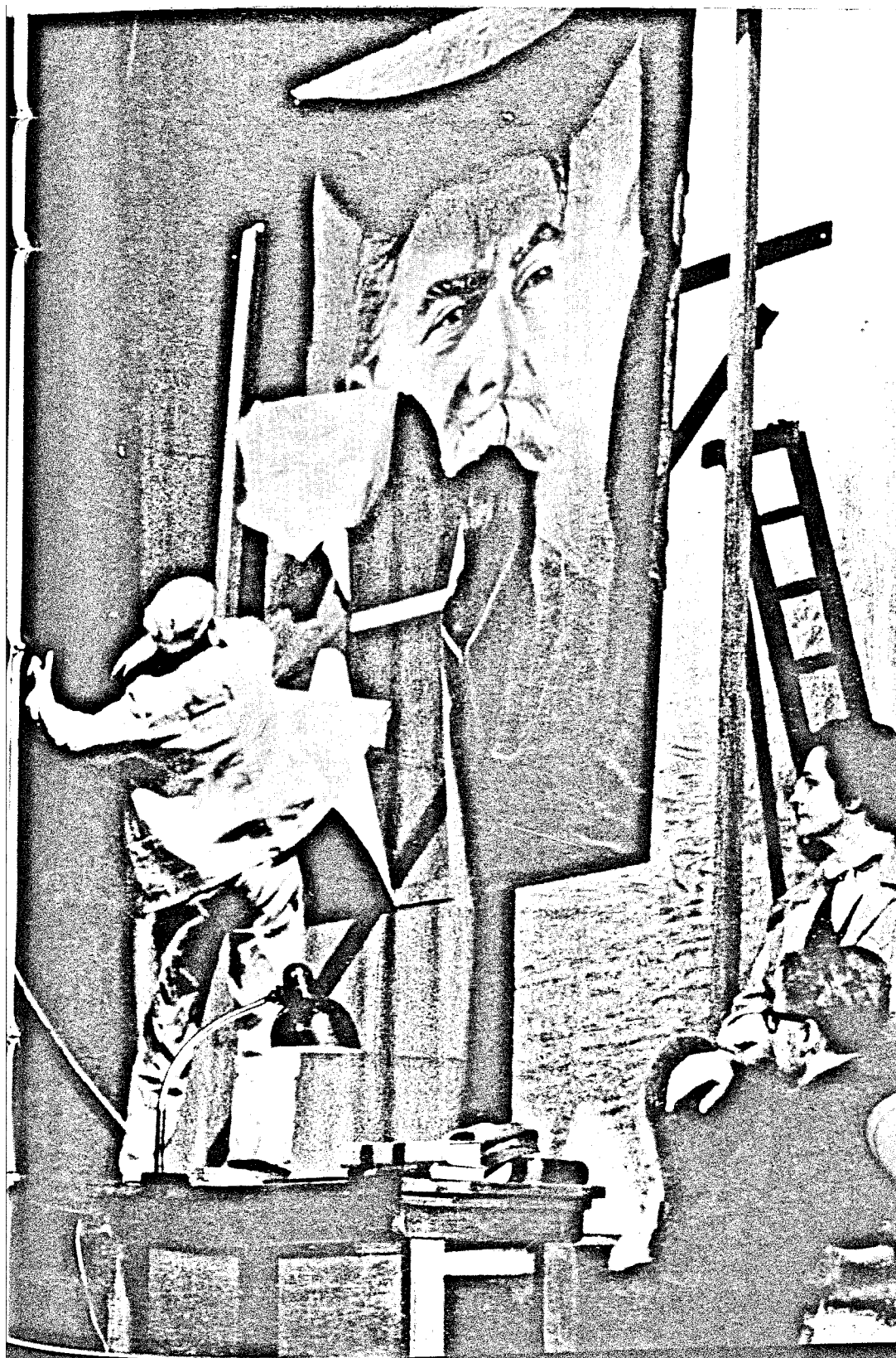
Many of those whose fate it was
to represent prisoners
had grown up under the same conceptions
as those
who got themselves into the role of the guards
They had dedicated themselves to the same nation
and to the same progress and profit
and had they not been appointed prisoner
they might have made a guard as well.

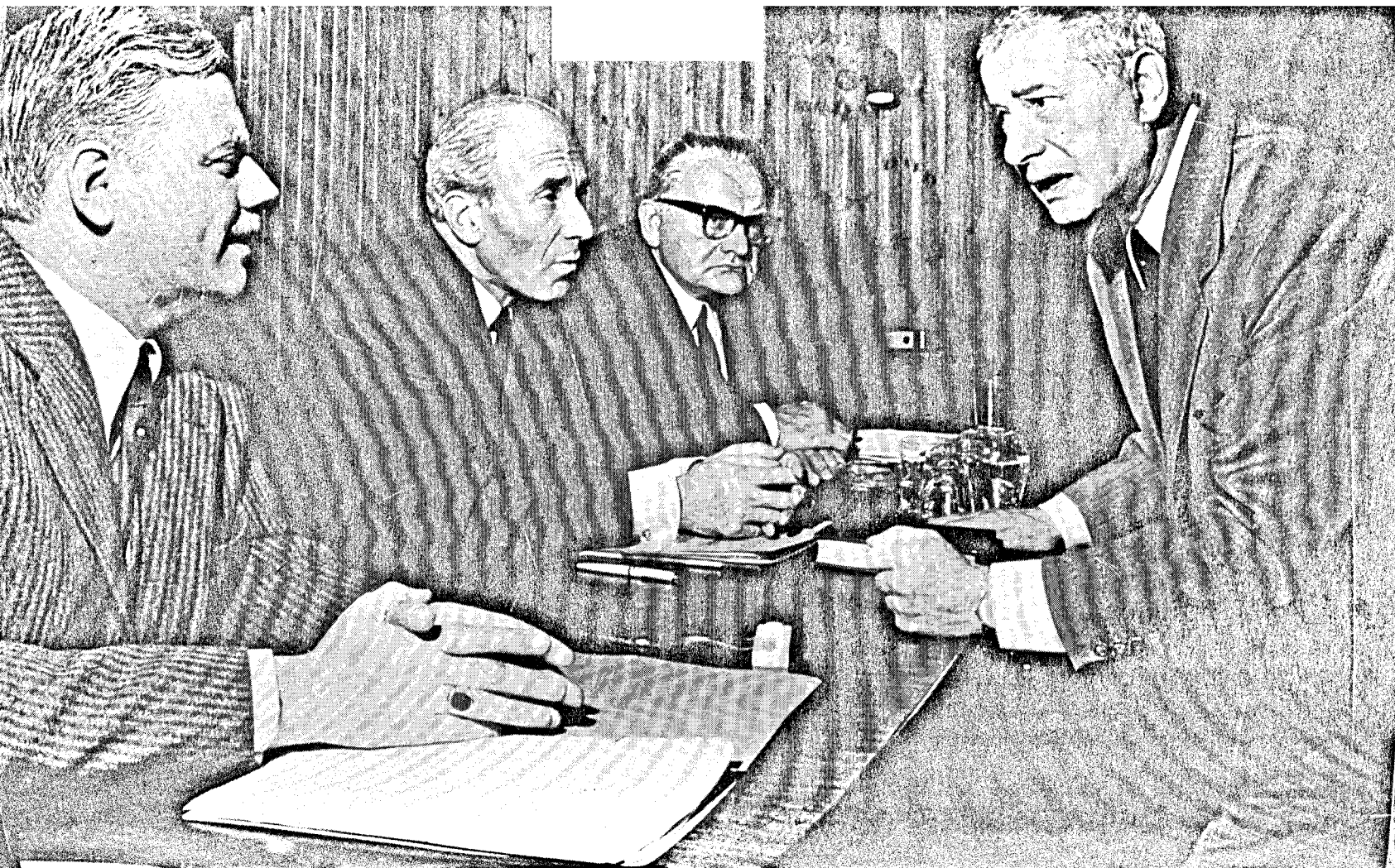
Henning Rischbieter principally considers "theatre without art insufficient, and political theatre without art even more emphatically so." "The Inquiry" should be acceptable to him. And still, there is something about the experiment that leaves one uncomfortable. Critics like Horst Müller feel that "The Inquiry" is neither genuinely political nor a genuine piece of art. It is indeed difficult to judge the play critically, leaving all its extra-artistic aspects aside. Auschwitz may be the one theme where art is bound to fail, at least in the near future. There will be many, and perhaps not the worst of judgement, who for some time to come will prefer the bareness of Naumann's Records to their 'filtered' rendering on the stage.

Photographs : P79 "The Investigation" by Peter Weiss. P80 Boleslaw Barlong, Director-Manager, Schiller Theatre, West Berlin.









This does not mean that "The Inquiry" is the end of a development. More documentary plays are in the making. Wolfgang Graetz was not very successful with his play on the German revolt on July 20th, 1944 "The Conspirators"; now Hans-Helmut Kirst is preparing another one "The Revolt—Tragedy of July 20th, 1944"—in co-operation with Erwin Piscator, at whose Freie Volksbühne in West Berlin the first performance was scheduled for January 20, 1966.

In the meantime Gunter Grass, author of "The Tin-Drum", wrote his first full-length play, "The Plebeians Rehearse the Revolt". It had its first performance on February 15th, 1966, at the Berlin Schiller Theatre. From the point of view of documentary theatre, which is applicable considering its theme, it is a relapse. Once more the author has taken charge.

This is the historical background of the play :

On June 16th, 1953, the day before the revolt reached its climax in East Berlin, Brecht had gone from Buckow to Berlin in order to discuss the latest events with his colleagues. On the 17th, he wrote a letter to Ulbricht :

"... The great discussion with the masses on the peace of socialist reconstruction will result in a clarification and consolidation of the socialist achievements. It is my desire to express to you at this moment my loyalty to the Socialist Unity Party of Germany: Yours, Bertolt Brecht." Only the last sentence of the statement was published. Once again Brecht turned to Ulbricht :

"... Now I hope that the *provocateurs* will be isolated and their nets of contact destroyed; the workers, however, who demonstrated out of the justified dissatisfaction should not be confused with the *provocateurs*, so that the great discussion on the mistakes made everywhere, which is so necessary, is not disturbed from the start."

Lines from a poem written by Brecht about that time, "EvilMorning"

Last night in a dream I saw fingers pointing at me
Like on a leper, they were toil-worn and
They were broken.
Ignorant ones ! I cried
Conscious of guilt

have provided Grass the conclusion of his 'German tragedy' :

You ignorant ones ! Conscious of guilt I accuse you, are the last words of the 'Boss' before his exit.

Photographs : P81 "The Plebeians" by Gunter Grass, Berlin Schiller Theatre. P82 "Oppenheimer" by Heinner Kipphardt, Free Volksbühne, West Berlin.

With a good deal of poetic licence, Grass intensifies Brecht's dilemma. A rehearsal of Brecht's "Coriolanus"-version is interrupted by workers in revolt. Instead of preparing the manifesto they ask him to write for them, he studies their speech and gestures to utilize them for his production.

In Grass's play, the conflict between theatre and politics, between literature and history, art and reality has itself become the theme. It is certainly not out of the way to make Brecht (called the 'Boss') the centre of this conflict. "Brecht, the ideologist"—as opposed to Camus, the moralist—"perceived the horrors of our century, the general suffering as the sum total of millions of individual cases merely as subject-matter for his writings" (Jürgen Rühle). Or, in the Boss's own words (Act IV, Scene 7):

Very well. Perhaps a couple of poems can be scraped out of all the misery.

VOLUMNIA : You want to write again ?

BOSS : Does my intention frighten you ?

VOLUMNIA : Yes, my friend. I am afraid truth will make you eloquent.

BOSS (stands up, collects his papers) : Write as before. When little concerned me. Tasted like poached eggs and helped temporarily. Later then, among birch-trees in the north, wherever I sat on the suitcase ready for flight. Surviving the friends. Poor of words. Certain of few nouns.

"The Plebeians Rehearse the Revolt" is certainly one of the most important German plays recently written. But it leaves one half-satisfied, obviously on account of the uncomfortable proximity of historical fact and invention. With the reality of its theme and the artistic techniques applied by the author, it was bound to become a hybrid of two categories which are fundamentally irreconcilable. Occasionally, the artistic even turns artificial—*vide* the workers' speeches.

Brecht's failure becomes Grass' own. Trying to show the importance of art in the face of political reality, he uses art—*l'art contre l'art*. But the play is a magnificent failure, nevertheless.

In the endeavour of the German theatre to represent the recent past on the stage, one possible solution has been indicated by Judith Malina's and Julian Beck's Living Theatre, which has found a temporary

home in Berlin. Its "bare, unprotected, un-aestheticized, wordless trance-like, radically exhibitionist 're-enactment' of the death in the gas-chambers" (Henning Rischbieter) at the end of "Mysteries" is theatre beyond 'play', absolute theatre, authorless theatre—each individual actor, in total physical and spiritual engagement, becomes a victim by proxy, the performance a sacrificial rite.

As far as theatre is concerned, this is a *non-plus-ultra*. After this, there is only the silent drama of the 'pure' document, as it can be found in the fragmentary shorthand recordings of the conferences in Hitler's World War II headquarters. Could any 'absurd' dramatist's dialogue be more banal, more poignantly ironic than the Führer's remarks made on July 31st, 1944, eleven days after the attempt on his life had failed, at a time when his victims both at the front and at home died by the hundreds every da

On the other hand the miracle has happened to me that my nervous complaint has almost disappeared by this shock. There is still a little trembling of the left leg when the conferences take too much time, but before that, this leg used to tremble in bed. All of a sudden this has almost completely disappeared by this shock; by which I do not mean to say that I consider this the proper cure.

The quotations in the text have been translated by the author exclusively for this article.

Dr. Lothar Lutze, a Doctor of Philosophy was born in 1927. He has conducted research on the Elizabethan theatre, has done practical work for the Berlin student theatre and been associated with Max Muller Bhavan. He writes experimental poetry and criticism and is currently working on dramatic documentations on Adolf Hitler and John F. Kennedy. He is at present Representative in India, for the South Asia Institute, University of Heidelberg.