

THE NEW
THEATRE AND CINEMA
OF SOVIET RUSSIA

Being an analysis and synthesis of the unified theatre produced
in Russia by the 1917 Revolution, and an account of its growth
and development from 1917 to the present day.

By HUNTLEY CARTER

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PREFACE

THE aim of this book is to analyse and synthesise the theatre which has been established in Soviet Russia since the Russian Revolution of 1917, and which is the direct outcome of that world-influencing event.

No other country has developed a theatre so new and so strong, so life-centred and so unified, yet so varied in human interest as that of Soviet Russia. This theatre expresses more clearly and more forcibly than any other popular institution in Russia the Russian state of mind and its present amazing revolutionary exaltation, as we might say, and its efforts to create a new culture, new human relations, new conditions of life, new crystallisation of labour and thought. The Revolution has produced a new vision of Russia, a passion of life, a power of evocation, and it has set the People in the Workers free to express these in the form most agreeable to them. The form is a dramatic one. The theatre in which the new dramatic motive must find expression is as yet in its infancy, as yet practically unknown outside Russia, but it promises to attain a maturity and recognition full of rich inspiration for Western Europe and America, where at present there are no changes or developments corresponding to those of the theatrical movement in Russia. The new motive is, briefly, industrial civilisation. The new theatre in Russia is the means by which the meaning of this civilisation, which has hardly touched Russia, is being expressed. Already in this theatre the new power of Labour is realising, explaining and making itself known.

The cause of the theatre, its historical limitations, conception, organisation, methods and technical limitations, new traditions, spiritual, economic and social significance, its utopianism—all these deserve to be known and studied.

As far as I know there is no book in existence which fully

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deals with this theatre, explains what it is, its actuality and possibility. Indeed, the literature of the new theatre can hardly be said to have made a beginning, if we except the quantity of theoretical matter which has been published in the Proletcult Bulletins and Workers' journals in Russia since 1917. Existing books on the Russian theatre stop with the winter of 1917-18, at a period when the Revolution had made no perceptible difference in the organisation and work of the established theatres. A book of the kind has recently been published in revised form, but it really adds very little to what it said when it first appeared years ago. 2^b

It is noteworthy that reviewers of this book invariably deal with its contents as though the latter were a record of the Russian theatre of to-day, instead of being a record of the theatre during the winter of 1917-18, before the Revolution had had any effect on the established playhouses. Thus a reviewer in the *Manchester Guardian*, when dealing with the book, observes that the author¹ "brings under review every phase of theatrical art in Petrograd and Moscow, from the austerities of the Moscow Art Theatre to the modern exuberance of the Kamerny and the inspired vaudeville of the Bat." The writer means every phase of the 1917-18 theatres. The Bat theatre no longer exists in Moscow. Bailieff, its one-time director, is in America. The Moscow Art Theatre is old-fashioned, and the exuberance of the Kamerny began in 1914. The reason for this error is that the reviewers have not been to Russia recently, and owing to the fact that news from Russia has been so unreliable as to be a scandal, there is no data to show what the theatre in Soviet Russia is like to-day, they are compelled to base their comments and opinions on out-of-date information. We have no reliable facts and figures to prove that the Russian people are actually building a theatre for their own use which differs as much from the 1917-18 one as Heaven from Hades, and in which they are seeking to express a better form comparatively of civilisation than the one the Revolution set out to destroy. Article after article, review after review have appeared in the newspaper and periodical press. Books have poured from the publishing houses in an unending stream—books on Bolshevik politics, Bolshevik economics, Bolshevik morals, Bolshevik social life

¹ 'Manchester Guardian.'

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—some of them instructive, most of them worthless, some by writers who know the country well, others by writers like Mr. H. G. Wells who have paid it one flying visit of a fortnight. For the most part they testify to one thing. Russia is in political and economic agony. The agony of Russia is indeed a matter that absorbs the attention of St. Stephen's and the Stock Exchange. Of course, books of this kind have no space for the true Resurrection and Transfiguration of Russia as reflected by its new cultural institutions, foremost among them the new theatre. Indeed, they come to bury Russia, not to raise it.

The responsible papers which occasionally speak on behalf of Russia do not contribute anything towards a knowledge of the subject. A few months ago when I was in Moscow I wrote to the editor of *The Observer*, Mr. J. L. Garvin, offering to send him an account of the work of the New Theatre. I did so because I had noticed that he gave a generous amount of space in his paper to a consideration of the work of the continental theatres. Mr. Garvin sent me a perfectly courteous reply, saying that he was instructing his Moscow correspondent to send news of the theatre, and he could not accept my offer without risk of such news being duplicated. I was very glad to hear of his intention, and watched his paper week by week hoping to find that my effort to stir up interest in the New Theatre had resulted in a fruitful stream of information. But I got nothing for my trouble. Except a short paragraph announcing the performances of some unimportant plays not a word on the Moscow theatres appeared.

The same may be said of visitors to Russia, even those who have made a number of lengthy visits. If they happen to be unsympathetic, their talk is all of the dire effects of the war, revolution, civil war, pestilence, famine and what not. If they are sympathisers they praise the Government and Workers, and do what they can to influence foreign capital and concessions. Of the fresh culture which has arisen, of the New Theatre, with its humanising and maybe spiritualising interpretations, they say little or are as dumb as Eve when she plucked the apple. For instance, we have Lieutenant-Commander Kenworthy. He visits Russia for two months. He sees it making remarkable progress towards recovery in spite of what it has suffered at the

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hands of capitalist and militarist nations, and in spite of the difficulties surrounding its attempt at a daring experiment in a new form of government. He tells us he saw no prostitutes, and no drunkards. This kind of myopia is common to a certain class of visitor to Russia. His observations on the absence of other demoralising factors are equally startling. After several columns of inspired optimism of the kind, he sums up with a brief note on the theatre. Here it is.¹ "The theatre, drama, opera, ballet are flourishing. The ballet as an artistic spectacle is unequalled anywhere else in Europe or, I believe, in America. I visited a dozen theatres, cabarets, music-halls of all kinds from the largest to the smallest, and never once saw anything vulgar or indecent. So far as I can judge, any child could be taken to any theatre in Moscow or Petrograd without fear of contamination. This cannot be said of either London, Paris or Berlin."

It is true there are many references in foreign books and newspapers, especially German, to the new Russian theatre. But they are for the most part scrappy and of no value for enabling one to compose a comprehensive picture of the conception, organisation and work of this theatre. In 1922 Monsieur E. Herriot, Mayor of Lyon, visited Russia for the purpose of reporting on the situation. The result was a volume called² "La Russie Nouvelle." Of its 302 pages, two were devoted to "Les theatres," all of which went to show that the opera was flourishing, that at one time seats were free, and that the performance of "Carmen" with futurist decorations by Fedorovsky, pupil of Bakst, pleased M. Herriot very much. In the autumn of 1920 Mr. Henry Brailsford spent two months in Russia. Throughout the book³ which he produced as a result of his visit, he suggests that something new of a theatrical character was coming out of the new life. But nowhere does he attempt to describe the experiments that were being made. That he noticed them is clear from his own words, "all manner of experiments are in fashion." Elsewhere he remarks, "all this experimental art left me personally cold." The admission, of course, accounts for much. It probably means that Mr. Brailsford did not understand it, and therefore he was unable

¹ "Foreign Affairs," July, 1923.

² "La Russie Nouvelle," E. Herriot.

³ "The Russian Workers' Republic." H. N. Brailsford.

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to explain it for the benefit of those who could not visit Russia

It may be that the privileged persons who have visited Russia since the Revolution are not capable of appreciating and explaining the New Theatre. Russia is not an open country, and the Russian Government are very particular who they admit. They seem to prefer politicians, economists and social reformers to writers concerned with culture-developments. Certainly I have never met any newspaper men in Moscow, Petrograd or elsewhere who showed the slightest appreciation of the theatre. At the same time it should be said that there are very few English newspaper men in Russia. Lieutenant Commander Kenworthy, in the aforementioned article, says that when he "was in Moscow there was not a single British newspaper correspondent, with the exception of two very able Englishmen who were representing American journals." Mr. Arthur Ransome, a correspondent of the "Manchester Guardian," who lives at a little seaside village some distance from Reval, in Esthonia, and visits Russia occasionally, so far as I know, has never discovered an appreciation of the New Theatre. Mr. Michael Farbman, who writes for the Russian and English newspapers, particularly "The Observer," completely ignores it. I once met him in a Moscow theatre watching a daring experiment. He was looking as bewildered as a pea-weevil that has just given birth to a porpoise and does not know what to make of it. The absence of English pressmen from Russia has been noticed by more than one writer. Mr. Walter Duranty, sometime Paris correspondent of "The Outlook," London, and now Moscow correspondent of the "New York Times," said, in September, 1922, "that besides himself there was not a single other correspondent of any English newspaper or periodical stationed in Russia at that time."¹ There are many reasons why English pressmen are absent. One is that Russia is a long way off. Another, it is very difficult to get there. And a third is that the Russian Government are not very anxious to admit them. During one of my post-Revolution visits I learnt that I was the only English press representative in Moscow.

Unlike the few English pressmen who I have met from time

¹ "The Outlook," London.

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to time in Russia, I was properly equipped to estimate the new experiments in the theatre. I had an intimate knowledge of all sides of the theatre gained from many years experience as actor, producer, playwright; author of progressive works on the theatre, and international drama; and drama and art critic and editor. Moreover, I had the advantage of having formed a definite conception of the Theatre—what it is and means, and what human beings want of it. For this reason I never went to Soviet Russia without asking myself the questions: What does the Theatre mean to the Russian people? What do they want of it?

It is not unreasonable to say that the New Russian Theatre requires, more than any other theatre, a special equipment to understand it. This theatre reflects a change corresponding to the change in Russia itself and the entire life of the Russian people. I mean scientific knowledge remodelling industry and society. The "literary" dramatic critic bred by the literary movement in the Continental theatre during the past twenty-five years would not understand it in the least. When he came to apply his literary standards to its plays and acting—standards alone suitable to judge the Christy Minstrel method of theatrical interpretation common to the English theatre, he would be hopelessly at sea. He would find that he was no longer concerned with the qualities of diction, and the fitness of epigrams, the general logic of speech. He would find that he had no measure for the chief theatrical idea of the new Russian theatre, which resides in a great belief in body and brain disciplined action, in improvisation, in a combination of mimicry and neo-realism. He would find that the Revolution has destroyed literary methods, and brought to the front a new body of actors who act creatively and refuse to be actuated by the fossil ideas coming from the training academies, the libraries and museums of pre-war Russia and Western Europe and America. He would find that the men of the new theatre are engaged with the technical question of how best to raise the level of average interpretative power, and with it that of acting achievement. This means that they repudiate in the strongest possible way any claim on the part of speech alone, no matter how literary in its flavour, to take complete possession of the stage. They have no use for the drill-sergeant and the gramophone.

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phone employed in England's theatrical factories by so-called progressive producers. Likewise the stage-craft critic called forth by the attempt to convert the stage into an experimental studio for painters of easel pictures and designers of fancy linoleum would be out of it. The young Russians are engaged clearing away the pictorial scene and its dead lumber and weeds. In Russia æsthetic is dead and truth prevails. To them lighting and scenic effects are the least important parts of play representation. They believe the constructive actor who can surround himself with his own intensity comes first. They have come to the conclusion that the constructive scene is next. By "constructive scene" they mean one that intensifies acting and not merely hangs "decorations" on it. As to that scribbling phenomenon, the play critic bred by the commercial or shopkeeper theatre, he would be not only at sea but beneath it. Accustomed to estimate and appraise setting and properties supplied by leading firms, as fully advertised in the program-catalogue, he would find no news items about goods, firms and persons in a theatre based on primitive laws indeed, but not pretending to be a legacy from the early Phœnicians. He would discover that to test the work of a human theatre with the rules and standards it requires is a far different thing from producing the mischievous and unwholesome lucubrations demanded by a commercial enterprise run by syndicates of stock-jobbers, race-horse owners, and all sorts of speculators and gamblers, who aim solely to drain the pockets of a section of the public suffering from lassitude and sexual insanity. In short, criticism of the theatre evoked by the Revolution must lean heavily on the idea of a race of comparatively primitive people unfolding under the touch of a shattering life-centred experience which does not demand academical or shopkeeper forms of criticism. The Theatre has assumed a new form in Russia. It is advancing a new principle and has a higher aim. Criticism must do likewise. It must interpret a new vision of unfolding life and mind as expressed by the Russian theatre.

Besides the difficulty of obtaining adequate accounts of the New Russian Theatre, due to the fact that properly equipped critics do not visit Soviet Russia, there is the difficulty caused by the fact that no insurgent part of the New Theatre has visited Western Europe or America. Only academic theatrical

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companies, including those of the Moscow art theatre and the more radical Kamerny theatres, have been seen out of Russia. The extreme companies, those that are developing new technical ideas belonging to the machine factory world and in the inseparability of the theatre and life, are not allowed to leave Russia. Their plays are so bound up with political and revolutionary propaganda—from which, by the way, plays presented on tour by the Moscow Art Theatre company are not entirely free—and the desire to laugh at the bourgeois thought and action of Western countries that they would not be tolerated out of Russia. But the work of these companies, as a whole, contain many uplifting and formidable spiritual and technical ideas which can be separated from revolutionary politics and propaganda. These ideas belong to theatrical advance, and for this reason, if for no other, demand and deserve to be widely seen and studied.

A book is needed then to explain and introduce these ideas to the English theatre, especially at a moment when Labour need to advertise their new power, all seriously concerned with this theatre¹ "are now in the throes of a great argument about scenery and methods of production," when² "all over England there are little bodies of men and women making theatres for themselves." When there is great revival in the subject of a National Theatre³ "which nothing can prevent our having within the next ten, possibly five years." And when we read such announcements in the responsible press as⁴ "A company is being formed for the establishment of the Forum Theatre, whose artistic management will be in the hands of Mr. Theodore Kommissarzhevsky and Mr. Allan Wade, at a well-known West-End theatre."

Such a book would be one step at least in the adventure towards a good theatre in England. I say one step, because I am fully aware there are others to be found in the new directions taken and the intensity of experiment and achievement appearing in different parts of the continent. Such sources of inspiration are waiting to make themselves felt in England, but

¹ Mr. St. John Ervine, "Observer," 19.8.'23.

² Mr. John Masefield, preface to "Scene" (Gordon Craig).

³ Mr. W. J. Turner, "New Statesman," 28.7.'23.

⁴ Lord Howard de Walden, Letter to the "Outlook," 28.7.'23.

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for the moment are prevented by insurmountable economic and other circumstances from doing so. This brings me to an old subject, one I frequently wrote about before the war when I was international drama and art critic and editor of the "New Age." I mean the need of good books on the theatre. The need was pressing then; it is pressing now. In 1914 Mr. Gordon Craig wrote a long letter to the "Manchester Playgoer," a theatrical monthly edited by Mr. R. O. Drey, a business-man interested in the theatre and art. The letter was entitled, "In Defence of the 'Mask' and Mr. Huntly Carter," and was in answer to a violent attack by Mr. John Palmer, who at the time was engaged writing overwrought articles on the theatre for the "Saturday Review." After defending the "Mask" the letter went on to say: "And now regarding your dislike of Mr. Huntly Carter's plucky attempt (and in many ways a highly successful one) to bring before the English public something of the truth concerning the continental branches of the awakening European theatre.

"I must say, your dislike for his book is hard to understand. A man can only do his best, and when such a difficult task to perform as this self-appointed task which Mr. Carter undertook, and which everybody else shirked on account of its difficulty, then I think that man deserves a good deal of praise.

"Consider what it means, wandering from city to city, town to town in Europe, from Berlin to Munich, Munich to Budapest, then on to Moscow and Petrograd, back to Warsaw, and so on to Paris, gathering information all the time, while the difficulties instead of decreasing increase day by day—travelling without introduction from 'the heads of profession,' with precious little cash in the pocket, and no encouragement whatever from home—why, my dear sir, I call that one of the pluckiest things that we have heard of for a long time in the English theatrical world.

"The book is stocked with informing and interesting pictures and details galore as to how the different theatres are managed. I am of the opinion that though many critics will be in haste to condemn it, most of them will at leisure avail themselves of everything it contains. This first book of Mr. Carter's is exactly what we wanted, and we want more such books; we want books by all the critics—after they have made

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the same tour that Mr. Carter made. If their different journals won't commission them, let any critic of independence prove himself by making the tour as Mr. Carter did. The excuse that they can't afford it will no longer hold water. In the matter of information concerning developments taking place every six months in the foreign theatres, we are generally three years behind the times; always eighteen months. Foreign correspondents of the different journals cannot be reasonably expected to be thorough enough judges in so special a matter."

The book to which Mr. Craig refers as "my first book" is the "New Spirit in Drama and Art." It aimed to describe the new vision of, and the intense movement towards synthesis in the European theatres. In all the great cities I visited I saw men of the theatre endeavouring to unify life and art forms. It was a pioneering book which practically discovered the new European synthetic theatre to the young men of America and had the effect of sending many of them, as well as English actor-managers, among them Sir Herbert Tree, and producers to Moscow and other cities to see for themselves some of the facts which I had recorded, especially those concerning the organisation of the Moscow Art Theatre, which at that time was practically unknown to England and America. This form of pioneering I have pursued uninterruptedly ever since. From 1914 to 1918 I was never out of the danger zone in England and France and elsewhere on the continent. During the whole period I kept a close observation of the work of the theatres, and collected invaluable comparative records which I hope may see the light of publication some day. Since the Armistice I have spent many months each year in European countries in travail, including Soviet Russia, combining with my press work the study of the theatres of various countries and their change under the touch of great disaster, civil war, famine, blockade, bankruptcy, disease, destitution. I have done so under similar conditions to those described by Mr. Craig, that is, conditions in which I have received no assistance except from European theatrical directors, who have provided me with information concerning their theatres; and no reward except the intense pleasure of being engaged in a task to which one is passionately attached and, moreover, which is absolutely necessary. For

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like Mr. Craig, I regard the theatre as something more than a centre of idle amusement. To me it is an instrument for projecting the human soul into space in such a way that all who see it are initiated into its eternal truths. This way of initiation need not be difficult, irksome or dull. If taken through the play-spirit which resides in every human being, it might easily be filled with gaiety and laughter. Then the theatre stripped bare to its true, its simplest term, becomes—a playground.

The present book is then the latest record of my pioneering adventures and perhaps the most fruitful one. At the same time its production has been a self-appointed task, full of greater difficulties than any task preceding it. For one thing, a visit to Russia is still somewhat of an adventure full of awkward moments. The journey is long, eventful and exceedingly uncomfortable. Life in Russia is also very uncomfortable. Although improvement has set in, there is still an absence of ordinary conveniences which makes living anything but enjoyable. In Moscow there is no street lighting, in many thoroughfares there are not ten consecutive feet of pavement without a hole large enough to fall into, and in the hot season torrential downpours are frequent, and the street transport is chaotic. Theatre-going under these conditions is little else than a martyrdom. In the matter of receiving help from official quarters in my inquiries into the work of the different theatres I had a great deal to complain of. The directors of the theatres and their subordinates made frequent promises of assistance, but they never kept them. It may have been that they shared the fear which appears to be general, of giving information to strangers. Or it may have been that everyone is overworked; everyone has to work for their living, and no one has a moment to spare for any purpose except that of earning bread and butter. Or it may be that, as an American writer has observed, the Russians are by nature dilatory. Provided with strong letters of introduction he went to Moscow in the winter of 1917-18 to write an account of the Russian theatre. He spent 3,000 dollars, and he had the active assistance of a prominent Russian dramatic critic. Even then and under the most favourable circumstances he had to complain severely of the difficulty of getting information. Other explanations might be found in the peculiar psychology of the Russians as referred to

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by Scheffer and Hanotaux.¹ Another circumstance that operated against me was that during my last visit a quarrel with England took place. There was an intense wave of anti-English feeling, and everyone shut up like oysters whenever I asked for information. I also found it very difficult to get illustrations of the most recent ideas, because theatrical managers were too poor to have photographs taken. I was compelled either to take some myself or to pay fabulous sums to private persons who had received special permission to take some. I say all this not in a boasting spirit, but as evidence that I have taken a good deal of trouble to arrive at the truths concerning the advance of the theatre. "We want more good books on the theatre," says Mr. Craig. Such books are not to be obtained without trouble. And they are worth the trouble

¹"Manchester Guardian," Reconstruction Supplement. 6.7.'22 and 18.5.'22.
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