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# THE SOVIET THEATRE

*Its Influence Extends Far Outside Russia*

WITH the outbreak of Russo - German hostilities and the subsequent signing of the pact of alliance between Great Britain and the U.S.S.R. a hasty flow of "discoveries" about the puzzling vast country of the Soviet Union followed all over the world. For the Bolshevistic State kept more or less secret its achievements, setbacks, and defeats, and the head of the country—Joseph Dzugaschvili-Stalin — was often presented by cartoonists with his bushy moustache shaped into a question-mark. Now, when the Soviet successfully resists the might of Hitler, it becomes obvious that many surprises are in store for the world. To some people they are nice, agreeable surprises, to others (Axis) they reveal themselves as a brutal, unpleasant shock.

There is, however, one phenomenon in the Republic's life which was a well established fact, yet comparatively little known, especially to us here. This phenomenon belongs to the cultural sphere of life and is called "theatre." The Russian theatre has been regarded for the last half century as excellent, yes, the best in the world. It is quite

Written for "The Listener"

By

DR. LEON LIPSON

impossible to give a historical review of the development of the Russian theatre in one article, no matter how short the retrospective period may be. We shall endeavour, however, to give a fragmentary idea of how important a role the contemporary theatre plays in the shaping of the life of the U.S.S.R.

### Romanticism to Realism

The first problem is to differentiate between the Pre-Bolshevistic, Tsarist theatre and the present one. Both were equally good and as far as pure art is concerned equally successful. The actors in both cases reached the heights of artistic expression. The difference is hidden deeper: in the purpose the theatre is pre-destined to serve. The Tsarist theatre followed the *art pour l'art* maxim, while the Soviet theatre, after experimenting with all existing "isms," decided finally on so-called "socialist realism"—which, in fact, in-

corporates everything connected with daily life, labour, culture, emotions, ideas, etc. "The Theatre of Revolution," says a theatrical theorist in Russia, "has done away with pointless romanticism." It is true. The realistic Russia of to-day has no time for romanticism. Their stage is a mirror of life—with its struggles, defeats, and victories. Mostly victories, of course! It serves to increase the morale and strength of the people, to weaken and ridicule the "bourgeois" way of life, to stifle the counter-revolution. Though so prominently tendentious, the Russian theatre exerted enormous influence on practically every stage in the world. K. S. Stanislavsky, Jevreinov, Meyerhold, Nemirovich-Danchenko—to mention only a few—made history of the theatre. These men have followers in every country in Europe. To belong to Stanislavsky's school is a sufficient title to be regarded an excellent, sought-after actor. We do not want to be misunderstood. The influence of the Russian actors and directors is limited to technical and artistic details: the political influence and their ideas of usefulness of the stage itself is much more negligible.

### New Technique

The Soviet Theatre luminaries introduced a new style of interior, decorative art, lighting, acting, and directing. During a play performed in the Russian theatre the element of surprise, sometimes most unexpected, is never eliminated or impossible. Their technique is most progressive unorthodoxy. To give a cross-section of a block of flats, for instance, to present the life going on there, ideas conceived and petty jealousies, the director divides the vast stage into numerous parts or room-compartments, actors performing in each. True, the attention of the audience, being diverted by the variety of acts performed, cannot concentrate on the subject, nevertheless the real purpose of this scene, the picture cross-section, is admirably achieved.

These theatres, serving their educational and political purpose, are, of course, propaganda—but propaganda at its best, subtlest, and therefore more effective. To call it propaganda in disguise of art would be unjust; we shall be nearer the truth calling it "useful art."

Although the Soviet theatre produces mostly the plays of native writers, such as Aleksy Tolstoy, Illia Ehrenburg, Vishnevsky, Afinogenov, Mayakowsky, and others, works of playwrights of other nations are frequently being staged. Molière, Corneille, Balzac, Shakespeare—all find their way on to the Russian stage and the performances are always remarkable successes.

### A National Institution

The theatre in U.S.S.R. is a national institution par excellence. There is hardly a place in the Union where the theatre is not functioning. It has penetrated the Siberian tundra and Yakutia, the deeps of Kazakhstan and the mountains of Ural, Ukraine and Siberia, the State and collective farms, etc. Where there is no standing theatre, a theatre "on wheels" penetrates.

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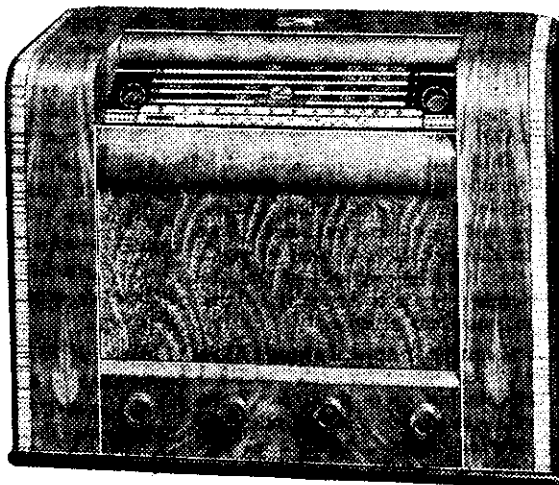
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