

A year ago a group of dedicated and principled people took over the direction of the magazine and began to fashion it once again into a source of intelligent comment and original ideas on drama and the theatre. . . . The danger to the establishment was clear. As more and more of those who regard drama as an art began to read *Theatre Arts*, [and] disgruntlement rose among . . . those to whom criticism is treason and experiment is neurosis, the beast struck back. . . . I mourn *Theatre Arts*, murdered by greed, complacency, stupidity, and fear. Murdered, it needs to be said, by drama-haters. That several of my own essays appeared in it during its short life of renewal and courage makes me, naturally, mourn it all the more. But what I chiefly lament is the state of the stage in America, whose dominant sections want neither the freshness and vigor *Theatre Arts* was offering nor, above all, the public revelation of their own maladies and delinquencies.

Perhaps, if there is a cry in the wilderness, if the collective voice makes its damning admission, we shall have to be heard from again. We shall try.

Gordon Rogoff

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LETTER FROM BERLIN, SPRING '62

Friends and Fellow Workers:

After which beginning it seems as if I should make an impassioned speech about *Socialismus und Arbeit*. In just three days I feel I've done more thinking than I did this whole last winter, that is to say thinking about the Theatre with a capital T and not a capital ME; thinking about the theatre artistically, socially, historically and not that emotional masturbation which revolves in New York around potential success factors in relation to past successes, in relation to future failure, in relation to daily reviews, box office receipts, and public relations. This should be a very confused letter since Berlin both as a town and as theatre faces one with many contradictions and a flooding of feeling. So if you'll bear with me, I'll spew everything forth as it comes to me and we'll see what happens. First let me say that after three days I have no desire to return unless it be to another metier. It's probably a good idea, therefore, that there will be three weeks between Berlin and New York. I don't think I could go straight

from here to there. I say this out of the pessimistic feeling that what I see at the Ensemble will not be accomplished during our lifetime, certainly not by our generation. I really don't think the fault lies with the New York audience so much as with the workers in the theatre who are not really workers, undisciplined, uneducated, and uninvolved, with no real passion and no real purpose. I feel now that I was right in walking out of *Oh Dad, Gideon, The Caretaker*, the new Williams play. In fact, I think I may stop going to the theatre in New York entirely. We don't go to galleries exhibiting mediocre examples of 19th century realism and we don't tend to go to band concerts: not when we have the New York Philharmonic and the permanent collection at the Museum of Modern Art. So why sit through and pay for theatrical evenings which at their best are thirty years behind the times: *The Blacks*, feeble Meyerhold and *A Man for all Seasons*, feeble Brecht and I mention these because they are among the best. I read in the *Observer* of the excitement generated by Olivier's coming theatre. Going there after the Ensemble would be like going from the theatre to the circus. It's amazing how much of all this I was able to forget in order to keep working in our theatre since last I was in Berlin. Enough editorializing. I'm sure you're more interested in the facts.

Berlin as a town, contrary to the propaganda in our press, is very quiet, in fact quieter than when last I was here. It is probably the most subtle siege in history with two armies lurking about somewhere but not a soldier to be seen in either sector except for the crucial border guards and the two Russian soldiers who still ironically guard a Soviet monument in the Western sector. It's hard to get a real glimpse of the Wall because the border has been pushed back about half a mile on both sides to prevent any assaults against it on May Day. But taking the elevated train over to the East you can see the barbed wire winding its way along the canal for miles in each direction. Getting to the Ensemble from the West is complicated only in that when you get to the other side you have to go through customs now and it tends to be a rather undisciplined affair. One day there are four people checking passports, the next only one. Sometimes it takes twenty-five minutes for me to get from my hotel to the Ensemble

and other times it takes over two hours. So I'm always either late, or having been careful, two hours too early. Since there are hardly any cafes in the Eastern Zone, I'll get over there and walk for hours waiting for curtain time. The East and West are both typical of the faults of each camp: in the West an overabundance of pastry, sausages, neon lights, and businessmen's conventions; in the East, a drab, still-destroyed world with little to look forward to. I can't imagine Easterners, apart from the artists, wanting particularly to go on living and I can't imagine Westerners, when they die, going to heaven. The Unter den Linden (in the East) in spite of the fact that there are almost no shops and nothing much in the windows but pictures of Party leaders, is nicer to walk on than the Kurfurstendamm with all its movie houses and cafes and dress shops, I suppose because the Unter den Linden patched up awkwardly out of the ruins, slowly, painfully slowly (I could see excavations which they were still working on two and a half years ago) still reminds one of what Berlin must have been like in the twenties, majestic neo-Classical buildings laced through with cozy, little parks: ghosts of Isherwood, Feininger, Reinhardt, Pabst, Piscator, the old Berlin intelligentsia and the old Berlin aristocracy, both rather wonderful.

Getting back to the Ensemble was like getting home again after a long time away. I was interested in which actors had replaced which actors and why, in the way I might be sincerely interested in why one of my brothers might change his job, and the other decide to go to Georgetown instead of Harvard. They are rehearsing *The Days of the Commune* and in a sense, more is to be learned from the rehearsals than from watching the finished productions. All of this becomes very difficult to describe so I'll just have to really flounder around. "The union of the mathematician with the poet, fervor with measure, passion with correctness, this is the ideal." Using William James is easier than describing things myself. A phrase you hear quite often at rehearsals is *ganz normal* and to make a bad pun, I can't help thinking how *ganz abnormal* our theatre in the West is, both in relation to the plays and to the players (here I mean directors, designers, producers, not merely actors). In the West, America, and so on, the plays seem overly concerned with what is sickly in our society. I think

the very fact that all but one in our group has undergone analysis is indicative of something. The Brecht Theatre is concerned with history not with case history. I can only look back on *The Blacks*, Michael's project (the play that is), Williams, Albee, and Ionesco, with a certain amount of revulsion ("I exaggerate to make a point," as the Meister says). *Ganz normal*. The atmosphere of rehearsal is relaxed, no hysteria, no pressure of ego, all four directors working together, with Weigel occasionally wandering in to throw out two bits with no one getting offended. Actors who are not involved in production wander in and out, and sitting next to me were two girls who are students of agriculture but find the theatre interesting. A collective job. A feeling of the laboratory combined with a real, German tradition of theatre. They rehearse a bit in the way movies are made, taking one shot over and over and over, trying one line over and over, moving the actors into different positions in relation to the set, changing the props in relation to the actors, over and over until it is perfect and tells the story. And in spite of this way of work, which would dry up our actors, they seem to stay fresh and responsive.

This reminds me: we must discuss when I get back that I feel Writer's Stage Company is not set up so that it can hope to discover or develop style. This, however, may be asking too much. I think that our most unique accomplishment is taking great strides in developing a collective way of work. We should keep emphasizing this. Look out for those producer-director problems. I would like to see Eddy do all our sets and I think Gordon should become involved creatively—producing is not enough. I think we should consider Michael playing one of the students in *P.S. 193* and being a part of all rehearsals as I will be on the *Love Nest*. I know this is difficult but we should try. We must conquer the ego.

Contrary to rumors in the West, the audience is still quite good at the Ensemble. While formerly, it's true, they would turn people away for *Threepenny* and now there are always a few empty seats, I don't think on any given night there are more than ten empty seats. And what an audience! No one would think, after arriving late, of taking a seat during a scene and if there is no opportunity to sit in between seats, they wait patiently till the

end of the act. They never leave until the curtain calls are over. These two aspects are usual to Germany, of course. What is unique is that the audience seems to feel it belongs to the Ensemble and vice-versa. That's natural since they see productions over and over and have the same feeling, I think, towards the actors that I do.

Last night they had the premiere of a kind of Brecht on Brecht evening, songs and poetry with orchestra and about twenty actors. At one point during a very jazzy but serious anti-war, military-beat song, Weigel couldn't contain herself any longer and broke into a Charleston. The evening was relaxed, fun, serious, almost as if one had invited some very talented friends over for dinner who then began to perform. During the encores, Weigel dedicated one song to Paul Dessau who was in the theatre and then dedicated *Moon Over Alabama* and *Show Me the Way to the Next Whiskey Bar* to me. If I was infatuated before, I'm madly in love with her now.

Time's running out since I have to leave for *Arturo Ui* in ten minutes. The company seems if anything, closer in solidarity since the Wall and since the defection of Palitsch and Co. They are using a lot of new, young actors. Weigel and Kaiser look almost out of place. Schall, strong, dedicated to Communism, the Theatre, and Brecht, (all tied strongly together) is very admirable. I wish I could have his strength of purpose. I think that Schall and Weckwerth may become leaders of the Ensemble in the future. Please keep this letter because it can be a good base for discussion when I get back. More later.

André Gregory